



US006356937B1

(12) United States Patent
Montville et al.**(10) Patent No.: US 6,356,937 B1**
(45) Date of Patent: Mar. 12, 2002**(54) INTEROPERABLE FULL-FEATURED WEB-BASED AND CLIENT-SIDE E-MAIL SYSTEM****(76) Inventors:** David Montville; Adam Montville,
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IL (US) 60657**(*) Notice:** Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this
patent is extended or adjusted under 35
U.S.C. 154(b) by 0 days.**(21) Appl. No.:** 09/347,361**(22) Filed:** Jul. 6, 1999**(51) Int. Cl.:** G06F 13/00**(52) U.S. Cl.:** 709/206; 709/219; 709/329**(58) Field of Search:** 709/201, 202,
709/203, 204, 205, 206, 217, 219, 223,
225, 227, 328, 329**(56) References Cited****U.S. PATENT DOCUMENTS**

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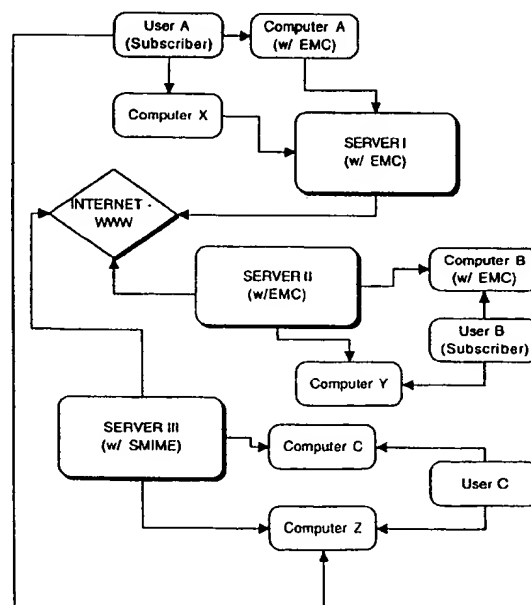
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Primary Examiner—Viet D. Vu**(74) Attorney, Agent, or Firm**—Chapman and Cutler**(57) ABSTRACT**

A full-featured e-mail system is used in both Internet-based and client-side (personal computer) forms. In each form, either basic e-mail service is provided to system subscribers or a secure, premium service with authentication, concealment, integrity, and non-repudiation functions for electronic messaging services is provided. In either form and at either level of service, subscribers can work off-line on their own computers with proprietary software loaded or, alternatively, on-line on any computer with an Internet connection. The system is interoperable, to preserve security, with all S/MIME compliant software applications, even for those users not subscribing to a service implementing the disclosed system. Digital certificates can be provided as a security service of the disclosed system, rather than requiring a second source with separate verification procedures. As additional optional features, the subscriber can control compression of outgoing attachment files, rather than having that function absent or operate in some automatic way. Decompression of such file attachments when received occurs automatically for subscribers, without having to invoke a different program or system. Interactive help features, book hierarchy uniformity for messages, accounts, certificates, virus warnings, and dual naming capability are also provided and available to subscribers in both the Web-based and the client-side application forms disclosed herein, and in both basic and premium service levels.

10 Claims, 8 Drawing Sheets

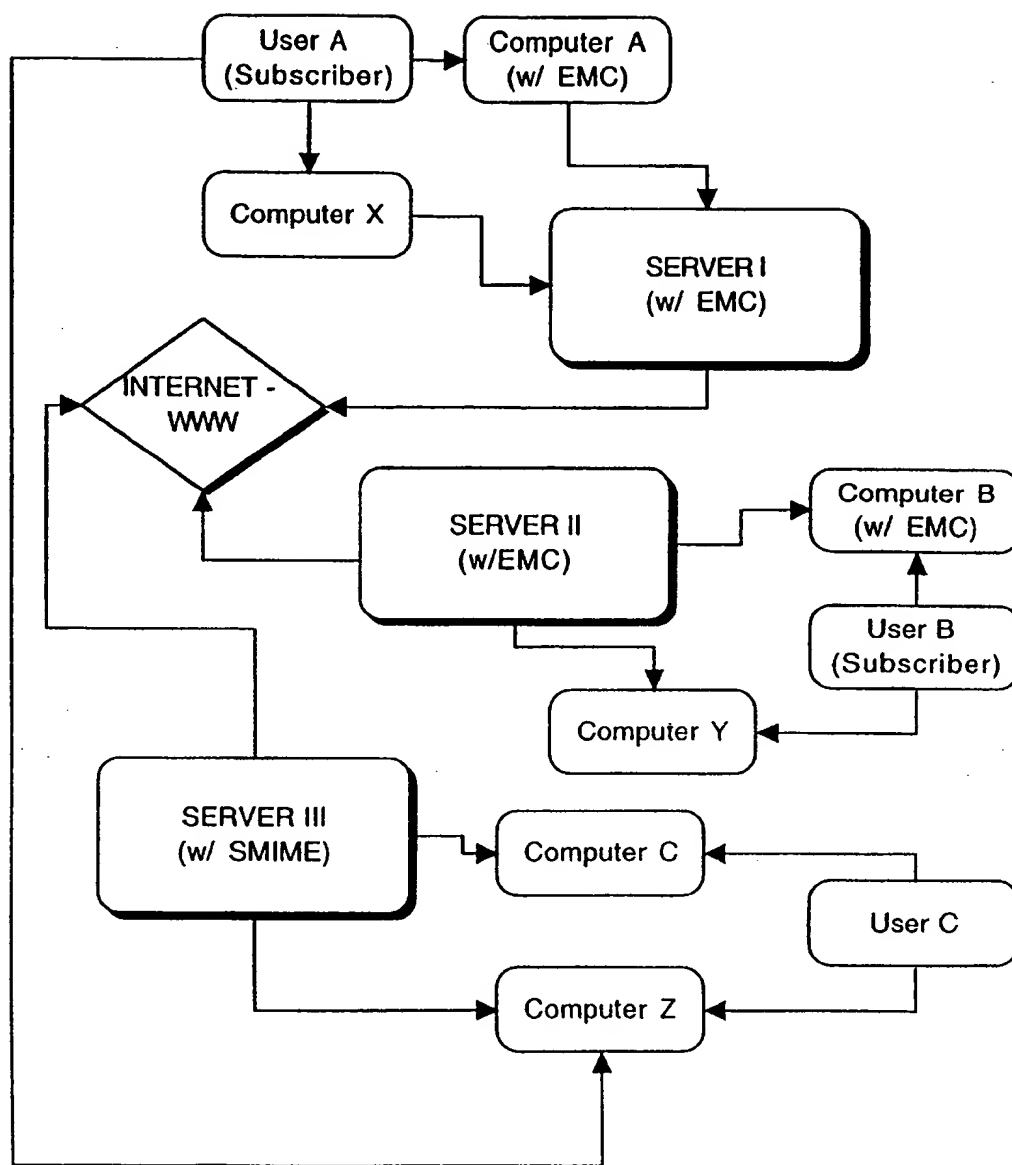


Fig. 1

FIG. 2

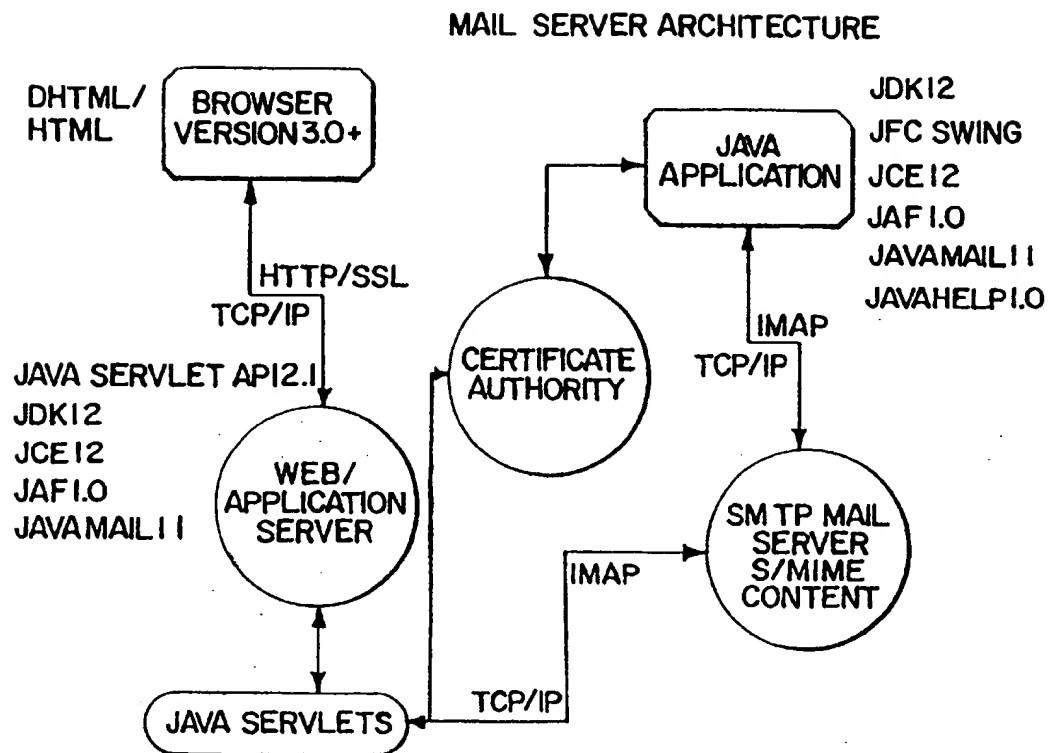


FIG. 3

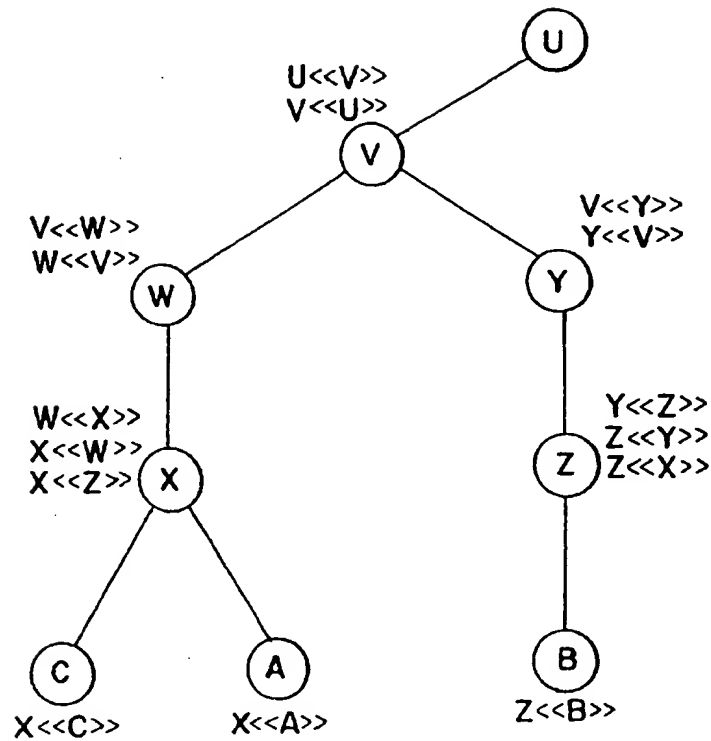


FIG. 4

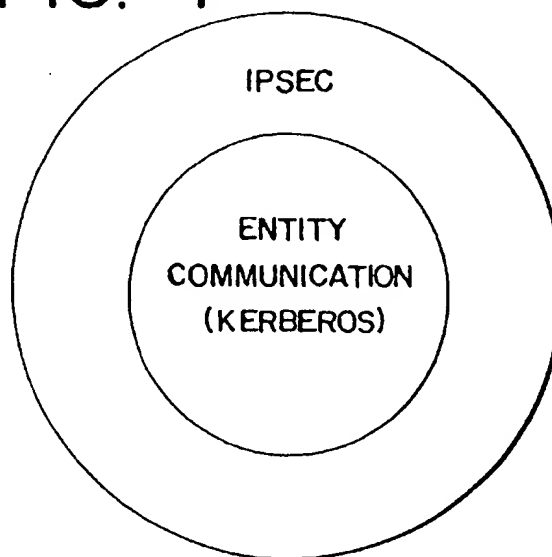


FIG. 5

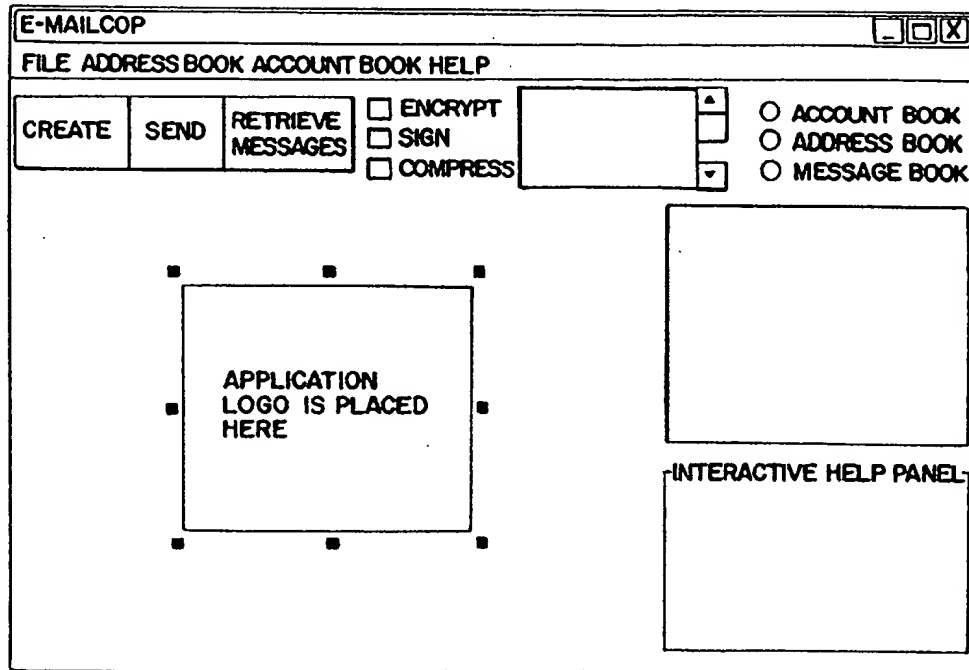


FIG. 6

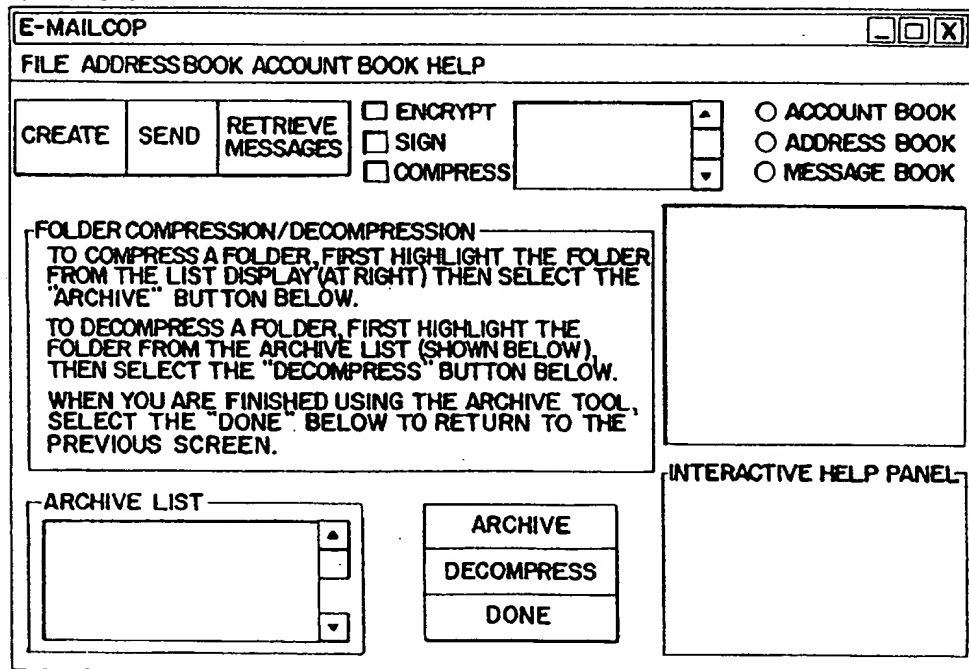


FIG. 7

The screenshot shows a window titled "E-MAILCOP" with a menu bar containing "FILE", "ADDRESS BOOK", "ACCOUNT BOOK", and "HELP". Below the menu bar is a row of buttons: "CREATE", "SEND", "RETRIEVE MESSAGES", and a group of checkboxes for "ENCRYPT", "SIGN", and "COMPRESS". To the right of these checkboxes is a vertical list of radio buttons for "ACCOUNT BOOK", "ADDRESS BOOK", and "MESSAGE BOOK". The main area is titled "PREFERENCE SETTINGS" and contains two sections: "OUTGOING MESSAGE SETTINGS" with checkboxes for "ENCRYPT OUTGOING MESSAGES", "SIGN OUTGOING MESSAGES", "COMPRESS OUTGOING MESSAGES", "APPEND SIGNATURE FILE", and "INCLUDE ORIGINAL MESSAGE IN REPLY"; and "MISCELLANEOUS SETTINGS" with checkboxes for "ENABLE VACATION REPLY" and "ENABLE INTERACTIVE HELP PANEL", followed by a "RESET INTERACTIVE HELP PANEL" button. A "DONE" button is at the bottom right. A text box on the right says "CHOOSE THE CHECK BOXES AT LEFT TO SET YOUR PREFERENCES THEN SELECT 'DONE' BELOW." An "INTERACTIVE HELP PANEL" is on the far right.

FIG. 8

The screenshot shows a window titled "E-MAILCOP" with a menu bar containing "FILE", "ADDRESS BOOK", "ACCOUNT BOOK", and "HELP". Below the menu bar is a row of buttons: "CREATE", "SEND", "RETRIEVE MESSAGES", and a group of checkboxes for "ENCRYPT", "SIGN", and "COMPRESS". To the right of these checkboxes is a vertical list of radio buttons for "ACCOUNT BOOK", "ADDRESS BOOK", and "MESSAGE BOOK". The main area is titled "CERTIFICATE BOOK" and contains a text box with the instruction: "HERE YOU CAN VIEW CERTIFICATES FOR YOUR RECOGNIZED CERTIFICATION AUTHORITIES, YOUR CORRESPONDENTS CERTIFICATES, AND YOUR CERTIFICATE." Below this is a row of buttons: "CAS", "PEOPLE", "YOURS", and "CRL". To the right of these buttons is a text box with instructions: "TO VIEW AN INDIVIDUAL CERTIFICATE FIRST HIGHLIGHT THE CERTIFICATE IN THE BOX AT LEFT, THEN CLICK THE 'VIEW' BUTTON." and "TO REVOKE [DISCONTINUE USE OF] A CERTIFICATE, FIRST HIGHLIGHT THE CERTIFICATE IN THE BOX AT LEFT, THEN CLICK THE 'REVOKE' BUTTON." Below the text box is a "VIEW" button and a "REVOKE" button. A "DONE" button is at the bottom left. A text box on the right says "TO EXIT, CLICK 'DONE'". An "INTERACTIVE HELP PANEL" is on the far right.

FIG. 9

E-MAILCOP [] [] [X]

FILE ADDRESSBOOK ACCOUNTBOOK HELP

CREATE SEND RETRIEVE MESSAGES ☐ ENCRYPT ☐ SIGN ☐ COMPRESS ☐ ACCOUNT BOOK ☐ ADDRESS BOOK ☐ MESSAGE BOOK

FILTER SETTINGS

NAME

IF THE TO: FIELD CONTAINS

THEN MOVE MESSAGE TO <SELECT FOLDER>

TO ADD A NEW FILTER, TYPE THE NAME OF THE FILTER, SELECT THE FIELD TO CHECK, TYPE THE STRING TO BE FOUND IN THAT FIELD, SELECT THE FOLDER IN WHICH TO PLACE THE MESSAGES, THEN CLICK THE "ADD" BUTTON BELOW.

TO DELETE A FILTER, SELECT THAT FILTER FROM THE LIST AT RIGHT, THEN CLICK THE "DELETE" BUTTON.

WHEN YOU ARE FINISHED EDITING YOUR MAIL FILTERS, CLICK "DONE"

TO RETURN TO THE PREVIOUS SCREEN.

INTERACTIVE HELP PANEL

FIG. 10

E-MAILCOP [] [] [X]

FILE ADDRESSBOOK ACCOUNTBOOK HELP

CREATE SEND RETRIEVE MESSAGES ☐ ENCRYPT ☐ SIGN ☐ COMPRESS ☐ ACCOUNT BOOK ☐ ADDRESS BOOK ☐ MESSAGE BOOK

ADDRESS BOOK

TO ADD AN ADDRESS, ENTER THE INFORMATION IN THE TEXT BOXES, SELECT A FOLDER FROM THE PULL DOWN MENU, THEN SELECT THE "ADD TO" BUTTON.

TO DELETE AN ADDRESS OR ADDRESS FOLDER, SELECT THAT ADDRESS OR FOLDER FROM THE ADDRESS BOOK DISPLAY, THEN SELECT THE "DELETE" BUTTON.

WHEN YOU ARE FINISHED EDITING THE ADDRESS BOOK, SELECT THE "DONE" BUTTON TO RETURN TO THE PREVIOUS SCREEN.

NAME E-MAIL

PHONE FAX

STREET

CITY STATE ZIP

<SELECT FOLDER>

INTERACTIVE HELP PANEL

FIG. 11

E-MAILCOP

FILE ADDRESS BOOK ACCOUNT BOOK HELP

CREATE SEND RETRIEVE MESSAGES

☐ ENCRYPT ☐ SIGN ☐ COMPRESS

☐ ACCOUNT BOOK ☐ ADDRESS BOOK ☐ MESSAGE BOOK

ACCOUNT BOOK

TO ADD NEW ACCOUNT, ENTER THE CORRECT INFORMATION IN THE TEXT BOXES, SELECT A FOLDER FROM THE PULL DOWN MENU, THEN CLICK THE "ADD TO" BUTTON.

TO DELETE AN ACCOUNT OR ACCOUNT FOLDER, HIGHLIGHT THAT ACCOUNT OR FOLDER IN THE ACCOUNT BOOK, THEN CLICK THE "DELETE" BUTTON.

WHEN YOU ARE FINISHED ENDING THE ACCOUNT BOOK YOU MAY EXIT BY CLICKING THE "DONE" BUTTON.

USER NAME

PASSWORD

SERVER NAME

☐ SET AS A DEFAULT ACCOUNT

ADD TO SELECT FOLDER ▾

DELETE DONE

INTERACTIVE HELP PANEL

FIG. 12

E-MAILCOP

FILE ADDRESS BOOK ACCOUNT BOOK HELP

CREATE SEND RETRIEVE MESSAGES

☐ ENCRYPT ☐ SIGN ☐ COMPRESS

☐ ACCOUNT BOOK ☐ ADDRESS BOOK ☐ MESSAGE BOOK

TUTORIAL

BACK FORWARD EXIT

INTERACTIVE HELP PANEL

FIG. 13

The screenshot shows a window titled "E-MAILCOP" with standard window controls. Below the title bar is a menu bar with "FILE", "ADDRESS BOOK", "ACCOUNT BOOK", and "HELP". The main area is divided into several sections. On the left, there are three buttons: "CREATE", "SEND", and "RETRIEVE MESSAGES". To the right of these buttons are three checkboxes: "ENCRYPT", "SIGN", and "COMPRESS". Further right is a small text input field with up and down arrow buttons. To the right of the input field are three radio buttons labeled "ACCOUNT BOOK", "ADDRESS BOOK", and "MESSAGE BOOK". Below the buttons and checkboxes is a section labeled "COMPOSER" which contains a sub-section with buttons "ATTACH", "SAVE", "SIGNATURE SPELLCHECK", and "CANCEL". Below these buttons is a large text area for composing the message. To the right of the text area is an "INTERACTIVE HELP PANEL" which is currently empty.

FIG. 14

The screenshot shows the same "E-MAILCOP" window, but now displaying the "SIGNATURE FILE" screen. The menu bar and the top buttons ("CREATE", "SEND", "RETRIEVE MESSAGES") are the same. The "ENCRYPT", "SIGN", and "COMPRESS" checkboxes are also present. The "ACCOUNT BOOK", "ADDRESS BOOK", and "MESSAGE BOOK" radio buttons are also present. The "COMPOSER" section is replaced by a "SIGNATURE FILE" section. This section contains a large text area for editing the signature file. Below the text area is a block of instructional text: "EDIT YOUR SIGNATURE FILE IN THE TEXT AREA PROVIDED ABOVE. TO SAVE YOUR CHANGES, SELECT THE 'CREATE SIGNATURE' BUTTON. TO EXIT AND RETURN TO THE PREVIOUS SCREEN, SELECT THE 'DONE' BUT TON". Below this text are two buttons: "CREATE SIGNATURE" and "DONE". To the right of the text area is an "INTERACTIVE HELP PANEL" which is currently empty.

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INTEROPERABLE FULL-FEATURED WEB-BASED AND CLIENT-SIDE E-MAIL SYSTEM

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to systems and methods for providing electronic messages and other communications using the Internet or World Wide Web ("Web") and a variety of personal and other computers available to different subscribers and users.

BACKGROUND OF THE ART

Most all persons that are engaged in commerce and/or in any sort of interpersonal relations are, by 1999, very well familiar with "e-mail" as a form of virtually-instant, written communication using the Internet and the World Wide Web. Many millions of people in the US and abroad now have access to computers they may use at home, at work, at school (from grade-school to college), at public libraries, at "cyber-café's", at office services centers or stores, at colleagues' offices and homes, and at myriad other places. On such computers they can compose and send or receive e-mail messages using a modem, an Internet Service Provider ("ISP"), and an e-mail program either loaded into the computer or provided, often free, by the ISP or another Web host. Eudora® is a commercial e-mail program loaded onto a user's computer (i.e., "client-side") for composing and sending and receiving e-mail. Client-side programs are often required for use at colleges, allowing students to work off-line and then dial in to the central server just to upload and download their messages. Hotmail® and many other e-mail systems reside on servers accessed from the Internet, such as those at msn.com, and can be accessed only while on-line with the e-mail system server via the Internet. However, a user must be at his or her own computer to use the client-side application, and has no access to such e-mail otherwise, as while travelling without the computer. Further, a user relying on Web-based e-mail can work on the e-mail system from any computer with an Internet connection, but only while connected to the Internet and incurring telephone and other charges.

No commercial e-mail service is known to provide both on-line and client-side services that are similar to one another in use. A need exists for a subscriber to be able to work selectively either (1) from his or her own computer using personal settings, information, and files, or alternatively and equally well, (2) from any other computer through a server that can access the user's "home" server and still have available the user's personal settings, information, and files.

Security is also a need for electronic messaging. Messages and attachments are typically sent between computers and servers and between servers over non-secure lines, and stored on intermediate servers as they are routed to their destinations. Messages are sent in multiple "packets", so that not all of a message will go the same route to its destination server, thus providing some inherent security in the Internet system. However, messages and attachments stored on the origin and destination servers are vulnerable to snooping by persons with knowledge of computer intrusion tactics. Encryption techniques are known, whereby a subscriber may encrypt his or her text before it goes to the origin server and the text stays encrypted until it reaches the recipient's computer, where it is displayed as plain text without further action by the user. Complete security systems for electronic messaging require also, however, additional features of authentication of the sender's identity, integrity of the mes-

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sage and attachments as against modifications in transit, and assurance against repudiation by the sender. None of these three added security features is available on any known Web-based e-mail system, although some client-side systems provide them.

Many security standards and algorithms are available for use in secure messaging. S/MIME, SSL, and X.509 standards are used in some secure client-side systems but not in any known Web-based system, except that SSL (Secure Socket Layer) is used in two recently released commercial products, noted below. Many security algorithms are known and used in secure client-side e-mail systems, including 3-DES, Diffie-Hellman, DSS, MD5, RC2/40, RSA, and SHA-1; none of these is used in any Web-based application, save one of the recent commercial products. That product uses Diffie-Hellman and a further algorithm called Blowfish.

Useful e-mail systems provide additional features, besides simple messaging, that are helpful and desirable. Permitting address book(s), attachments, downloading of messages, and filing of messages into separate folders are typically allowed on some Web-based and most client-side systems. Features of checking multiple e-mail accounts and affording universal access from any computer are provided by Web-based systems but not by client-side systems. Typically, when users want help on a particular subject or action, they must obtain assistance from a menu or sub-menu, then search the help listing for the appropriate subject. Often, these help menus are inadequate or confusing or don't even try to offer the information the user requires. Virus warnings and dual naming procedures for log-in are known but not commonly used.

Very recently, two secure, Web-based e-mail systems have appeared commercially, under names of ZipLip and HushMail. Both of these systems provide concealment or privacy features, but neither includes the three other data security features of authentication, integrity, and non-repudiation. They use Secure Socket Layer (SSL) security standards for encrypting messages in transit. HushMail uses the Diffie-Hellman algorithm (which is recognized in the S/MIME standard) as well as the Blowfish algorithm (which is not); ZipLip uses none. Neither system permits message download or multiple e-mail account checking, but both permit universal access from any computer with Internet access. ZipLip permits attachments, while HushMail does not. HushMail has address book and message folder features not in ZipLip, and ZipLip permits attachments whereas HushMail does not. Neither system is interoperable with other systems, but one must use the ZipLip or the HushMail systems to access messages developed within those systems.

Microsoft has recently offered a Web-based tool referred to as Outlook Web Access ("OWA"), as a part of the Microsoft Exchange server. Included already in Microsoft Exchange has been "Outlook Client" ("OC"), a full-featured, client-side e-mail software application, which supports the S/MIME standard. The OWA program permits a subscriber to access his or her messages residing on an OC server for sending or receiving same from over the web, but there is no access while on OWA to a subscriber's personal information, files, or settings. OWA is not S/MIME compatible, so the client-side and Web-based capabilities and experiences are very different.

Thus, no known e-mail system or service, Web-based or client-side, offers features of compression of attachments on demand, an integrated certificate authority and service provider, both Web-based and client-side access, an interactive help system, a virus warning system, and dual-naming

log-ins, built into the system. Rather, such features and functions must be accessed and accomplished if possible by going to other programs, slowing a user's electronic messaging procedure greatly.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides a robust, full-featured electronic messaging system with combined Web-based and client-side access that works equally well both from a subscriber's own computer with proprietary software or from any other computer connected to the Internet, with only very small differences in appearance and operation. Either way of access allows use of all features of the invention, including all security features noted below if the Internet connection is suitable.

The present invention provides both a basic form of service, both Web-based and client-side, and also a premium, secure level of service with all four of the security features of authentication, concealment, integrity, and non-repudiation, when used from the subscriber's computer or with a suitable Internet access.

The present invention permits inter-exchange of electronic messages with others that are not subscribers to the present system. For a subscriber to send a secure message to a person not a subscriber, the user need only be sure that the user's server and computer are set up to use the S/MIME protocol.

The present invention provides additional important features of multiple account checking, universal access, attachment compression on demand and automatic decompression, integrated certificate authority and e-mail service, interactive help, a uniform hierarchy for books of messages, e-mail accounts, and certificates, a virus warning system, and dual-naming log-in protections. All are useable from the subscriber's own computer, using the software system of the invention, and alternatively from any computer with suitable Internet access, using a password or -phrase to access the subscriber's own information, files, and setup.

The method of the present invention provides for programming both a Web-based server and a personal computer application with an e-mail messaging service configured to interact with and to shadow each other as to personal information, settings, and files of an individual one of said subscribers. The method includes steps of storing the personal information, settings, and files of a subscriber both on the Web-based server and on a personal computer running the application. Then the subscriber may access his or her files off-line solely through the personal computer and may alternatively access the files on-line through any computer able to communicate with the server. Access is then allowed to the messaging service via the server for a subscriber's sending and receiving electronic messages.

The present invention further provides for a digital certificate service with the messaging service. The Web-based form of messaging service is made secure against interception of messages. A subscriber can access the server of the messaging service from a personal computer using the Web-based form of service through an S/MIME compliant application to connect between the computer and the server. In a Web-based environment, a digital signature is provided to an authorized recipient, the signature verifying the identity of the sender, the integrity of the message, and the fact of the sending by the sender. The user is given control over whether or not to compress the file size of each outgoing attachment to a message; for subscribers, the decompression

of each compressed attachment happens automatically when a subscriber opens it. Interactive help screens are provided on each subscriber's computer, both on-line through any computer and off-line if used through the subscriber's computer. Each of these help screens is displayed as it becomes pertinent to the task being then executed by the subscriber. The subscriber may turn any of these help screens on and off, however. A substantially uniform book hierarchy is provided for messages received and messages sent, e-mail accounts, and certificates available to the subscriber. A warning of possible virus contamination of attachments to a message is provided. Dual naming capability is available in the invention for more secure log-in, by requiring a log-in name as well as a user name upon log-in.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a general operating diagram of the method of the present invention, depicting operation of the electronic messaging system in different circumstances for various subscribers and users.

FIG. 2 is a detailed depiction of the architecture of the system, showing functional servers and connections.

FIG. 3 is a depiction of the chain of certificates used in the system for verifying identity of the senders of messages in the system.

FIG. 4 is a depiction of the security system used in the invention for communications lines.

FIGS. 5 through 14 are screen shots of the various screens used in a preferred embodiment, implementing the invention.

THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

The present invention combines network/server architecture and, in one embodiment, a privacy-enabled e-mail application. This application, here called "EMC" for short, allows any e-mail service provider to offer privacy-enhanced e-mail to its users. EMC was developed with the following goals in mind:

1. The architecture must be robust and scalable in terms of cost and security,
2. The architecture must provide a standard level of security in any configuration,
3. The architecture must provide an overall security package to the client and the end-user,
4. The e-mail application must be universally applicable, to fill any user's needs,
5. The e-mail application should incorporate many useful features that are not found in currently existing e-mail applications, and
6. The e-mail application should be easy to learn and use, and should provide continuous feedback to the user.

The architecture of the invention has a minimum set of requirements that allow ISP's the opportunity to implement EMC with little or no additional overhead costs. This minimum set of requirements can be utilized to provide a robust platform from which to provide secure e-mail services. EMC attains goals nos. 1 and 2 above through the hardware/software specification of the EMC network. This network is scalable in terms of the number of servers used, the type of connections used between servers, and the backup capability of the servers. This underlying architecture uses state-of-the-art technology to provide the means by which EMC fulfills goals nos. 3-6 of the previous list.

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The architecture of EMC was designed for three purposes:

1. To securely provide certificates to end-users,
2. To securely provide a Certificate Repository, and
3. To securely provide the mail server for the e-mail applications specified for use with EMC.

These three purposes are met by the architecture specification, which provides these services securely by strategically using firewalls, secure routers, public key encryption, and specific authentication protocols. This design offers an overall security package for the service provider and the end-user. Fulfillment of these goals is achieved through implementation of the e-mail application as in the implementation and system deployment example of FIG. 2.

As shown in the system architecture diagram of FIG. 2, a subscriber to EMC will use a Web browser of recent vintage in conjunction with Java and other applications on his/her own computer, whether a desk-top PC, a laptop PC, an Apple machine, a workstation, etc. The application, in any of various forms available, contains all the functionality of the client-side EMC program, loaded to the hard drive of the subscriber's computer as from a CD-ROM or down-loaded and saved for execution from the Internet. The mail server and the Web/Application server cooperate at the server level through Servlets as shown to provide the functionality needed at the server level, and to cooperate with the subscriber through the browser as controlled through the EMC application, as embodied in Java or a similar language. The Application and the e-mail server cooperate with a Certificate Authority to generate a certificate for communications and to keep that certificate for use when needed by the application either at the computer or the server level. Communications among the different entities are conducted over lines secured by the various protocols shown, or others of similar effect.

In order to create universal appeal, the e-mail application provides two implementation forms and two levels of service. The first form is a Web-based implementation that uses distributed computing technology to provide e-mail service without downloading by the end user. The second implementation form is an application that is loaded on or downloaded to the subscriber's personal machine and run locally. The ability to offer the two complimentary forms for implementation is paramount to EMC's goal of providing robust e-mail services. The Web-based form permits subscribers who do not have their own computer, who travel, or who otherwise use different computers to access and use these e-mail services. The client-side application is used by subscribers who do not want to be online for long periods for composing and reading messages. The ability of a single subscriber to use either of these implementations alternatively, on the same account, provides universal access to versatile e-mail services.

The Web-based form of the invention uses distributed computing technology to provide full-featured e-mail services to an end-user subscriber from any suitable computer that is connected to the Internet and has an Internet browser. Currently, full-featured e-mail with privacy enhancements is available only in those e-mail applications that are run on the end-user's local machine. The drawback of this approach is that the user needs to be at that machine in order to use the e-mail application, and thus have all the expected e-mail features and also secure communications. The Web-based form of this invention provides secure communication to or from any place the subscriber is located.

The two forms of the invention have the following features that are unique to EMC's architecture:

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1. Fully integrated, controllable compression/decompression;
2. The Web-based form is capable of using privacy enhancements as provided by X.509 certificates;
3. A context-sensitive Interactive Help Panel for interfacing continuously with the subscriber as the program is used; and
4. A "Book" system as is typically applied to e-mail address organization in other e-mail applications is extended to organize message lists, account lists, and certificates.

Several of the above features merit discussion. First, most e-mail applications (Web-based or client-based) do not provide the end user with optionally useable compression/decompression tools. Rather, the user must manipulate the file to be compressed/decompressed in an application separate from the e-mail. A few e-mail applications automatically compress outgoing message attachments that are of a particular size and/or quantity, but the feature cannot be turned off or varied. The present invention integrates compression technology and places control with the end user or subscriber.

The privacy-enhanced Web-based e-mail feature, at a premium level of service above a basic level, should provide all four of the important attributes of security: concealment of the message contents against snooping by others, integrity of the message as against changes in what the sender sent, authentication that the person or user named actually did send the message, and non-repudiability by the sender that the message was indeed his or hers.

The program warns when messages or their attachments may contain viruses, worms, and other undesired programs that may harm the computer or its files. The user can then take appropriate action, including scanning with a detection program to confirm the presence and type of virus present, and to destroy the virus identified, by then taking appropriate further steps.

The program further permits increased security by adding a further layer of name protection. Currently, the user name and log-in name are the same, although they need not be. EMC is set up to require separate entry of the user name, log-in name, and password.

The Interactive Help Panel of the invention extends the known concept of such computer aids. The Interactive Help Panel continuously displays to the user suggestions and "tips" for the current action the user is performing. Thus, the Interactive Help Panel is context sensitive, i.e., it "knows" where the user is in the program and what the user is trying to accomplish, and it continuously offers instruction on how to complete the task.

The invention offers a "book based organization" that is modeled upon the conventional address book. Received/draft messages, user accounts, and digital certificates are, according to the invention, organized as separate "books." Thus, EMC provides an Address Book, Account Book, Certificate Book, and a Message Book. This innovation provides the subscriber with a familiar way of viewing different information.

Cryptography is the process of hiding information; that is, when something is encrypted it is rendered unreadable to all but certain people who are able to see the underlying information. Two types of encryption are used today: public key and private key. Private key cryptography requires two users to share a secret key (i.e., only they know what the key is) and makes use of this common knowledge to hide correspondence and other data from would-be eavesdroppers. Public key cryptography provides each user with two

keys. One key is publicly available, and the other is kept privately (i.e., no one else knows the key's value). In public key cryptography, concealment is achieved when one user encrypts a message using the intended recipient's public key. The recipient can then use his or her private key to decrypt the message. No person can decrypt the message except the user who possesses the private key that corresponds to the public key with which the message was encrypted.

Client-side e-mail messaging systems may use both public and private key encryption to conceal messages. This is primarily because public key encryption is much slower than private key encryption. As a result, a secret key is randomly generated and used to encrypt the outgoing message. Then, the secret key is encrypted with the public key cryptosystem, and the encrypted message is sent with the encrypted key. By themselves, cryptosystems are inadequate in the sense that anyone can encrypt a message to send to someone else without proving their identity; that is, it would be easy to forge an encrypted message to someone else. Requiring the use of digital signatures, below, combats this possibility.

A digital signature is a piece of information sent with a message that proves that the message originated from a particular person. It is analogous to a written signature, and is, in some situations, considered to be legally binding. Digital signatures serve for non-repudiation as well as verification functions.

The use of digital signatures and public key cryptography is powerful; however, it does have its flaws. If used without the proper structure, there is no way to identify the individual sending a message. In fact, anyone could sign and encrypt a message without ever revealing his or her identity. A digital certificate enables an individual sending a message to prove his/her identity, at least partially. A digital certificate contains a user's public information and a signature from a certificate authority (e.g., VeriSign, Inc.). Digital certificates and their use are standardized in the X.509 standard. When digital certificates are used, there is little question of validity, non-repudiability, and integrity of sent messages.

In sum, there are four basic security issues in electronic communications: concealment, integrity, authentication, and non-repudiation. The solution to these problems is referred to as full digital security. The application of cryptography in its various forms addresses each of these concerns; however, the application must be appropriate for these concerns to be properly addressed. Digital signatures, if used properly, provide non-repudiation, authentication, and data integrity. Encrypting an entire message provides concealment. By using encryption and digital signatures properly, one can achieve a secure communication foundation with the only potential risk, besides the compromise of privately guarded information, e.g., private keys, being brute force attacks, but this depends largely upon the cryptosystem being used.

Several cryptographic algorithms are widely used today. The most common private key cryptosystem is the Federal Government's Data Encryption Standard ("DES") as specified in Federal Information Processing Standards Publication ("FIPS PUB") 96. DES is a private key cryptosystem, which means that any two parties wishing to communicate securely must share a common key. The data to be concealed is encrypted with this key, sent, and then decrypted with the same key. A variant of this standard is referred to as triple-DES or "3-DES". 3-DES typically uses two keys and three rounds in the following manner: first, the message is encrypted with the first key, then the result of the first round is decrypted with the second key, and, finally, the result of the second round is encrypted with the first key. DES, which is specified to have a key length of 56-bits, has recently been

broken by brute force. However, 3-DES has not yet been broken. The most common public key cryptosystem is the Rivest, Shamir, and Adleman algorithm ("RSA"). It has not yet been broken, and is as strong as its key length (similar to DES in this respect).

A somewhat less powerful public key cryptosystem, presently useful for export purposes, is RC2/40, by the developers of RSA. It works with a 40-bit key, and is not considered secure. However, it can be exported without consent from the US government because its key length is so short.

Digital signatures are achieved by using a specific algorithm, and always use public key cryptography as a foundation. The Digital Signature Standard ("DSS"), also known as Digital Signature Algorithm ("DSA"), is specified in FIPS PUB 186-1. The DSA does not, however, sign the entire message. Rather, a message digest or hash is first created using a particular algorithm. Message digests are formed in fixed lengths and derived from an arbitrary length message in such a fashion that no two unequal messages will result in the same digest. DSA first computes the message digest of the message it wishes to sign, then encrypts the resulting hash value with the private key to create the signature. This signature is then appended to the message and sent as usual.

Two message digest algorithms are important here. The first is MD5, developed by Ron Rivest (of RSA fame). MD5 produces a digest quickly, but not necessarily very securely, as it has some known weaknesses. The second, and more important, hashing algorithm is the Secure Hash Algorithm ("SHA"). SHA is specified in FIPS Publication no. 180-1, and has no known weaknesses. SHA takes slightly longer to process information than MD5; however, the trade-off between time and security is well worth the wait. Furthermore, SHA is specified to work with DSA and the forthcoming ECDSA, below.

The state-of-the-art of digital signatures and cryptography relies upon elliptic curve cryptography ("ECC"), a public key cryptosystem. ECC offers greater security at a substantially lower key length than RSA or other public key cryptosystems. There are currently two identical draft standards (IEEE P1363[12] and ANSI X9.62[1]) that define the DSA for elliptic curves (ECDSA). Elliptic curve cryptography, given its strength-to-key-length-ratio, is the future of cryptography, and existing standards, such as the X.509 certificate standard, will aspire to accommodate various ECC algorithms in the future.

As an additional note, the National Institute of Standards and Technology ("NIST") is seeking a replacement for DES. This replacement will be selected from a pool of 15 candidate algorithms currently under review. The replacement is already known as the Advanced Encryption Standard ("AES"). AES is expected to be finalized early in the year 2000.

The Secure Multipurpose Internet Mail Extension ("S/MIME") protocol provides a secure overlay for the Internet mail standard MIME. MIME is an Internet standard documented in RFC's 2045-2049, providing extensions to the basic e-mail standard RFC 822. These extensions provide for greater flexibility and interoperability of existing e-mail applications as well as expanding the type of data that can be sent via e-mail. Secure MIME provides the capability to use certificates and a variety of cryptosystems. Currently, S/MIME supports the following cryptographic mechanisms: SHA-1, MD5, DSS, RSA, Diffie-Hellman, 3-DES, RC2/40. These cryptographic algorithms comprise a good set of cryptographic tools.

S/MIME provides a universal cryptography tool kit with which a user can enhance the privacy of e-mail correspondence. S/MIME is specified for using the X.509 v3 certificate standard, and uses this standard as a basis for forming trust among individuals. A centralized authority issues these certificates, thus providing a verifiable path of trust.

Central to many Internet services is the issue of user authentication. Authentication here refers to the ability to determine that a sender is who he/she claims to be, in that the sender is bound to the name used. A subtle distinction exists between this definition and other uses of "authentication", which may rather require proof that a user's identity is not false. Here, authentication only binds a single, unique user to the user name. That is, the user name relates to a particular person, who may remain anonymous. To authenticate the identity of an individual to whom a username belongs requires physical presence of that individual.

For a subscriber to log-on to EMC, a separate (i.e., non-certificate-based) authentication procedure is used, employing public key cryptography in accordance with FIPS PUB 196, ("Entity Authentication Using Public Key Cryptography"). Once the user is logged into the service, all requests are performed with Kerberos wrapped in IPsec protocol.

Kerberos is an authentication protocol that can be utilized by subscribers and other entities requesting services on a network. It is said to be scalable, but for the purposes of EMC, it needn't extend past a simple protocol level. Kerberos uses public key cryptography to authenticate users with an Authentication Server ("AS"), and a Ticket Granting Server ("TGS").

Kerberos was designed with the following implementation goals:

1. Secure: An eavesdropper should not be able to obtain any information that would allow impersonation. Kerberos should not be a weak link in the security chain.
2. Reliable: Kerberos should be implemented with redundancy in mind, to prevent denial of service attacks.
3. Transparent: Ideally, the user/entity being authenticated should not be aware that authentication is taking place, with the exception of a necessary user password.
4. Scalable: Kerberos was designed for a distributed, modularized world.

Thus, the model is scalable to numerous clients and servers.

This authentication scheme is typically used for user authentication, but is suitable for entity authentication as well. An entity is defined to be a process or server that requests service from another process or server.

A Ticket is similar to a certificate and contains information about the entity making the request and the nature of the request. Kerberos is designed to virtually eliminate any compromise of passwords and private keys, replay attacks, and other potential security risks. This does not mean, however, that Kerberos is flawless. Kerberos relies upon time synchronization between servers. If an attacker could somehow fool a server into believing the time was different than it was supposed to be, then the attacker could circumvent Kerberos. No authentication protocol is completely flawless.

On a basic level, the entity requesting a service sends a request to the authentication server, which replies with an encrypted Ticket. The Ticket is decrypted by the entity applying for services, and then sent to the TGS. The TGS then replies with a Ticket for the particular service requested and that Ticket is sent to the server from which services are requested.

Each local network using a Kerberos authentication system can be scaled with other networks implementing Kerberos. Each network is called a realm, and the multiple networks implementing Kerberos are referred to as Kerberis. That each realm can interoperate with the other is useful for the obvious reason that several smaller, modularized networks can communicate securely.

There are currently two versions of Kerberos in use, and they are competing for wider acceptance. These versions are Kerberos v4 and Kerberos v5. Version 5 is a major overhaul of v4, but the objectives are the same. Version 5 offers greater flexibility as to the environments in which it can be applied by enabling Tickets with more extensions than those in version 4. EMC is specified to use Kerberos v5.

Certificates adhering to the X.509 standard are those that are issued by a granting authority for use in secure e-mail and digital signatures. The X.509 standard has several different versions, the latest of which is version 3. Version 3 contains extensions that are not found in the previous versions and allows for greater messaging flexibility. Aside from defining the specific content of certificates, the X.509 standard also sets the stage for Certificate Authorities and how they are to implement the use and issuance of certificates. More precisely, X.509 specifies that an issuing authority must create a Certification Practice Statement, which defines various policies pertaining to the issuance and use of X.509 certificates.

Unfortunately, the above practice allows for wide policy variance between different issuing authorities. However, at least two groups are currently working on extending the X.509 standard to close some of the "holes" that are left to be filled, and to provide for a better standard. In particular the Public Key Information Exchange ("PKIX") is a working draft of the Internet Engineering Task Force and will be a superset of X.509. Another group, the Meta Certificate Group, is also seeking to expand on the X.509 standard. When the working drafts are implemented as standards, those entities employing X.509 certificates will easily transition to the new standard of choice.

FIG. 3 represents a certificate chain that validates various certificates. The notation $X \ll Y \gg$ is defined in the X.509 standard, and is read as X signs Y. The root must be a Certificate Authority. There can be many trees with many roots in existence and they will all be able to certify each other, provided that each root has signed the root of the other trees. That is to say that if two trees, say A and B, have distinct certificate chains and the CA (root) of each tree has signed the other CA's root certificate, any certificate on either tree (A or B) can be verified by any other certificate on either tree (A or B).

A Certificate Authority ("CA") provides a trustworthy certificate chain to users of the Internet. Certificates typically conform to X.509 standards. Furthermore, CA's are required, as stated in X.509, to create a Certification Practice Statement ("CPS"). The CPS is what defines a CA and its offerings. VeriSign, a PKI corporation that provides three levels of certification in a class system, provides the best example of a CA. The three certificate levels that VeriSign offers are class 1, class 2, and class 3. Class One certificates have the lowest secure authentication, and Class Three certificates have the highest level.

A CA should have differing levels of certificates; however, a three-tier class structure seems to be too confusing and complicated for EMC's purposes. Certificates provide for secure e-mail and non-repudiation; however, the true identity of the user on the other side of the communication is still unknown. Thus a two-tier class system should

be all that is necessary. The lowest level of security a certificate should offer is that which binds an e-mail address and a credit card account to the user applying for a certificate. There is no guarantee that no credit card fraud is taking place, thus identity is not absolutely proven.

The second, and higher, class of certificate guarantees authentication of the user's true identity via physical identification. This means that the user applying for a level-two certificate needs to be identified with proper credentials (i.e., a passport or driver's license) by the CA or a licensed signatory. A particularly easy method of achieving this goal would be to have the user download and print a legally binding document (the document can contain a digital watermark to protect the integrity of the document) that the user can sign in the presence of a notary public or other official. The document is then physically sent (by courier or mail) to the issuing CA for confirmation. The approved applicant would receive the issued certificate in one of two ways. The certificate would either be distributed via password authenticated secure Web download, or it could be sent via certified mail or by some other trusted courier.

A Certificate Authority has several issues with which to be concerned. First is the concern over the secure delivery of private information over the Internet. This pertains to the distribution of approved certificates of any security class. A secure connection, either via a new dial-up number or via a secure Web page using SSL, must be established and appropriately used to distribute a new certificate. Second is the concern over the validity of the claim of identity made by an applicant. In other words, is the applicant really who he/she claims to be? Unfortunately, without physical appearance and credential checks, there is currently no cost-effective method to achieve valid authentication of identity by digital-only means. Third is the plausible lifetime of a certificate. By some mathematical models, the lifetime of a root certificate should only be about two weeks. By practice standards, however, the root certificate lasts for a year or longer.

The architecture of the present invention relies on each operator of the system (e.g., each ISP) being either an Issuing Authority (granted a license by the ultimate CA), or being the CA itself. The Certification Practice Statement ("CSP") of EMC's architecture requires that varying levels of true authentication be provided in a two-tier system, and that key generation, root certificate generation, and destruction of keys and root certificates be done on a FIPS 140-1 level four approved computer. Moreover, the CPS provides requirements for setting up the certificate service when implementing the EMC architecture. That is, when authorization is licensed to any issuing authority, the authority must provide proof that the architecture of EMC is in conformance to security guidelines as specified in the architecture layout and in the CPS. These requirements provide for cohesion among those issuing authorities affiliated with the certificate authority.

Essentially, the CPS is the central controlling point for EMC and is the doctrine by which EMC is implemented. The familiar VeriSign Certification Practice Statement provides an adequate foundation from which extensions can be made to provide a more comprehensive, authentication-friendly service. EMC provides two "levels" of confidence when generating its certificates. The lower level of confidence verifies the user's identity via digital information, and the higher level of confidence requires the user to sign a legal document in the presence of a notary public or similar officer for personal identification verification. The lower level of verification only binds a certificate to a particular

e-mail address or password, whereas the higher level of verification binds the certificate, the e-mail address, and the actual identity of the individual. This is not necessarily foolproof, as an applicant presenting false identification to the notary public or other officer could circumvent even the highest level of verification.

The EMC hardware architecture provides secure e-mail services from a safe, yet flexible source. Consideration is given to security, authentication, validation, and ease of use. The Architecture may consist of several servers: mail, certificate authority, web/application, and a servlet server (as shown in drawing FIG. 2). All servers communicate with Kerberos authentication wrapped in IPSec protocol, as in FIG. 4.

Secure communication between servers is accomplished by using IPSec, an Internet security protocol applicable to local area networks. IP Security specification is complex, but is well documented in the following RFC standards released by the Internet Engineering Task Force:

RFC 1825: An overview of a security architecture;

RFC 1826: Description of a packet authentication extension to IP;

RFC 1827: Description of a packet encryption extension to IP;

RFC 1828: A specific authentication mechanism; and

RFC 1829: A specific encryption mechanism.

The specification for IPSec is known to those of skill in the art. Differences exist between communications between servers and communications between a server or ISP and a user. The communication between the server and the user (e.g., sending e-mail) is handled by Kerberos, and the underlying communication between servers is handled with IPSec. See FIG. 4.

This security redundancy helps eliminate "sniffers" and other would-be attackers from snooping on communications. Furthermore, Kerberos virtually eliminates replay attacks, regardless of the underlying communication security. Perhaps the best way to understand the way different levels of security are engineered is to think of requests for service as being Kerberos, and communication of those requests as being handled by IPSec.

The EMC servers are functionally different from one another, thus each server has different operating requirements. The optimal operational requirements, as presently known, for the servers are listed below with brief justifications. These requirements are necessary to meet EMC's most secure specifications:

TGS: this server should be a dual processor (quad capable) system running a B2 trusted operating system. This is the server that grants Tickets to requesting entities. High processing speed is a requirement in that this server is often asked to do a lot of work in a short amount of time.

AS: this server also should be a dual processor system running a B2 trusted operating system. The authentication server need only be applied to once per session when using Kerberos v5, thus the server must be at least as fast as the TGS, and the TGS must be at least as fast as the AS. The trusted operating system is necessary because this server provides entity authentication.

PKS: this server should have dual processors, is quadruple processor capable, and is highly expandable in the number of hard-drives it can accommodate. It is important that this server be "hot swappable" so that new hard-drives can be added without an interruption

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of system service. Because this server houses the Certificate Revocation List, it, too, runs a B2 trusted operating system.

Mail: the mail server should be a quadruple processor machine with hot swappable disk expansion. Much information is continually changing on the drives of this machine, thus the processing speed needs to be high. Of similar importance is the level of the operating system for the mail server. As with the other servers, this server also uses a B2 trusted operating system. The combination of speed, flexibility, and trustworthiness creates an environment that is conducive to good business.

KCGS: this is the most critical server. This server must conform to level four security levels as specified in FIPS PUB 140-1. Furthermore, each of the two required machines should contain dual processors and be quad processor capable. There are periods when these machines are required to generate much mathematical data in short amounts of time; thus the processor speed is of the utmost importance. Storage space, however, is not a large concern. Sufficient storage is necessary to store any cryptographic files that are necessary for generating digital certificates.

Firewall: the firewall server is also of critical importance, whether there is a single firewall or a dual firewall configuration. The firewall is responsible for "filtering" incoming traffic as well as releasing outgoing traffic. As such, the firewall should be run on a quad processor machine. The firewall requires little in the way of hard-drive space, but a substantial amount of RAM. The firewall(s) conform to the B2 trusted system status.

Public Access: the public access server should be a dual processor machine. This server is the central location from which individuals check publicly available information and/or apply for digital certificates. The amount of hard drive space required by this server depends largely upon the amount of information to be stored on it. Because the Public Access server acts as an access point to critical server processes, e.g. certificate generation, it must reside on a B2 trusted system.

The above represents general requirements for the various servers to be provided in any given implementation of EMC. Each server should run on a B2 trusted operating system (as specified in the Department of Defense "Trusted Computer System Evaluation Criteria"). The amount of Random Access Memory ("RAM") is commensurate to the duties and processing needs of the particular server. Because some of the servers may be doing more or less work than others, the amount of RAM necessary varies between implementations. Similarly, the amount of hard disk storage needed to be available to each machine must be determined for each system, individually. Some servers, such as the mail server and PKS, require substantial amounts of space depending on the number of clients the particular implementation will support.

Where applicable, the server is highly expandable and/or extendable. As an example, the mail server will have the capability to expand as its user base grows. Once a mail server is at full capacity, another such server will need to be implemented, or a larger server will replace the existing one. In addition, each server must adhere to the requirements for server communication and entity authentication (IPSec and Kerberos).

The EMC e-mail application is available in two forms: Web-based application and client-side. The basic functionality of each implementation is the same.

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The application is designed to operate as either an applet-like program that extends to the user's computer and is run through a Web browser, or as a downloadable application that runs exclusively on the user's machine. The application contains the following list of features to provide a comprehensive and unique product. The following basic functions are found in both implementations:

Users can receive mail from any existing POP3, IMAP, SMTP, etc. account;

Vacation reply ability;

Improved Address and Message Books;

Spell checking capability of outgoing messages;

HTML anchor linking (ability to invoke the default browser);

Multiple addresses, e.g., for various members of the family (secure communication with separate certificates only);

User definable appearance (e.g. wallpaper);

The ability to mark read messages as "new";

Read messages are automatically downloaded to the user's machine after a specified amount of time; and

Print capability from the application.

Each implementation requires different handling of functionality in order to emulate these features; however, the differences between the overall look and feel of each implementation should go largely unnoticed by the subscriber. The e-mail application is designed to implement S/MIME messaging utilizing X.509 certificates.

The cryptographic modules in EMC are of security level four quality as defined in FIPS PUB 140-1:

"A Level 4 cryptographic module provides an envelope of protection around the cryptographic module. The intent of Level 4 protection is to detect a penetration of the device from any direction (rather than just attempts at the cover or door covered by Level 3 requirements) and respond by destroying critical information before it can be acquired. For example, if one attempts to cut through the cover of a cryptographic module, the attempt would be detected and all critical security parameters would be zeroed. Level 4 allows software cryptography in multi-user, multi-tasking systems when a B2 or equivalent trusted operating system is employed. A B2 operating system provides a large number of assurances of the correct operation of the security features of the operating system."

Essentially, the cryptographic module containing the software that produces authentication keys, certificate information, root keys, etc., should reside on a level B2 operating system. This makes reference to the Department of Defense Trusted Computer System Evaluation Criteria ("TCSEC", or "The Orange Book"). In addition to providing extra detection, environmental controls must be placed on the module. That is, the module should be able to check environmental conditions (i.e., heat) and to zero essential information upon experiencing threatening conditions, e.g., too high a temperature, or the module should be rigorously tested against such conditions.

The architecture of the EMC system provides security level four for the creation of digital certificates. This means that the machine, software, and any related hardware or software that is involved with the generation of keys, prime numbers, or any other portion integral to the creation of a digital certificate resides on a machine that meets the requirements to be certified for level four security as specified in FIPS PUB 140-1.

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The EMC architecture uses a rich array of cryptographic, authentication, and other protection protocols. Most of these varying protocols have been standardized. These standards will undoubtedly evolve. Each standard chosen for its particular duty promises to evolve nicely and evenly, thus providing EMC with a probable vertical evolution of its own.

This invention is designed to provide users with secure message transmission via the X.509 certificate standard as implemented with Secure Multipurpose Internet Mail Extensions ("S/MIME").

This invention has many distinct features and functionalities. The invention is designed so that an Internet browser can run one form of the e-mail service, or another form can be loaded onto a user's local machine to be run as a standard application. Sufficient information is supplied in this specification to allow a developer to implement the invention.

The features are listed in a hierarchical fashion, thus providing a developer the necessary background to sufficiently modularize the implementation. The modularity provides for easier coding and testing of the features contained in the application. The invention is described from the user's point of view, thus providing invaluable insight for the developer. If consideration is always given to the user, then the final product will be a good one that users will enjoy and appreciate using.

This invention is an e-mail application consisting of many common e-mail features, as well as some invaluable new ones. The major features of the e-mail application are listed below:

- Send and Receive messages, and Reply to and Forward messages
- Stop or initiate vacation response program
- Inbox modification
- E-mail Account book modification
- Application appearance modification
- Enable or disable signature appendage
- Address book modification
- Message filters
- Virus warning
- Dual naming

These are the primary features that create the functional foundation for the e-mail application. These features are further enhanced by adding the use of digital certificates (X.509), a built-in compression utility, and the overall dual functionality of being able to run through a browser or as a stand-alone application.

This application is designed with two general environments in mind. The first environment is that of an Internet browser, such as Netscape Navigator. In this sense, the application is to run through the browser in order to get to the user. The modular design of the application provides for simple transition between Web-based application usage and the second environment.

The environment first discussed is that of the Windows/Intel environment

This section lists the features of the application in detail. The format is an outline that places each feature either as a top feature of the application, or as a sub-feature of another feature. The highest features are those with the lowest number. These initial features are described as "level zero", and each successive level of sub-features increments this count. As an example, level four would be a feature located five tiers "down" in the hierarchy. The feature listing can be viewed as an upside-down tree where the root of the tree is at the top. In this case, the root of the tree is the application.

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The following outlines present the application features from the user's point of view. Each major feature is listed with its sub-features below, and is followed by a paragraph further explaining the features' intended purpose and their importance:

The Log-In functions:

0.1 User's Name

0.2 Log-In Identification

0.3 Password or Pass-phrase

The 3-step long-in requirement affords an added level of security for a user. Normally the User's name is used as the Log-In identification, but this need not be so.

The Send Messages functions:

1.1 Address Lookup

1.2 File Attachment

1.3 Spell Check Message Body

1.4 Compression Attachment(s)

1.5 Encrypt Message

1.6 Digitally Sign Message

The user needs to have the ability to send messages. Sending messages involves composing a message, selecting an address to which the message is to be sent, attaching media files, encrypting/signing the outgoing message, and, if applicable, compressing any of the attachments to the message. The composition feature is inherent to all e-mail applications. The application provides message composition with all of these features.

The ability to compress outgoing message attachments from within the e-mail application is a unique feature of the application in that the compression is handled entirely by the application and relies on no external application.

The Receive Messages functions:

2.1 Add Address to Address Book

2.2 Save Attachment(s)

2.3 Decompress Attachment(s)

2.4 Verify Digitally Signed Messages

2.5 Decrypt Messages

2.6. Virus Warning for Message Attachments

When receiving messages, the application displays the information important in describing the message(s), the content of the message(s), and the size of the message(s). This information is referred to as the header information of the message(s). At first, only the header information is retrieved from the mail server and displayed to the user. When the user selects a message to be read, then the complete message is downloaded and displayed to the user. Furthermore, attachment listings are provided prior to download. Some incoming messages may be encrypted, digitally signed, and/or compressed. The application automatically performs decryption, digital signature verification, and/or decompression as necessary.

The application's ability to automatically handle compressed files is a unique feature. The application also decompresses incoming attachments that have been compressed with, for instance, the gzip algorithm.

The View Message Book functions:

3.1 Add New Folder

3.2 Delete Existing Folder

3.3 Compose Reply Message

3.4 Manipulate Message Status

3.5 Order Messages in Particular Folder

3.6 Archive Folder(s)

3.7 Delete Message(s)

3.8 Save Originator information

The application provides a rich set of tools that the user can employ to organize messages. The message folders are displayed to the user in a three-folder format. The three main folders are the inbox, the sent folder, and the draft folder. The inbox contains all messages received by the user, the sent folder keeps a copy of all messages that the user has sent, and the draft folder contains those messages whose composition has been commenced but not yet completed. In addition to these primary folders, the user can add new folders as sub-folders. Any created message folders can be deleted and easily moved to a new location. This provides for organizational flexibility such that the user can create a customized message folder hierarchy.

The Modify Account Book functions:

4.1 Add E-mail Account

4.2 Delete E-mail Account

4.3 Set Default E-mail Account(s)

4.4 Get Messages from E-mail Account

4.5 Create Account Folder

4.6 Delete Account Folder

The user is given the opportunity to check all existing e-mail accounts through one server—the application's mail server. The method in which it is presented to the user is unique. The user's accounts are organized in an account book. This account book holds, in addition to account information, information that instructs the application if the user would like the accounts to be automatically checked, or manually checked. Thus, the user has complete control over what e-mail accounts are checked and when they are checked. The account book better organizes the various accounts a user may have by providing the ability to group accounts into folders, and to provide the user with a clean interface with which to access other accounts.

The Modify Appearance functions:

5.1 Alter Background Picture

5.2 Import Background Picture

Many users have different tastes in music, entertainment, food, and many other activities. Users of the Internet, and thus e-mail, comprise the most diverse of all communities. The application provides the user with the ability to set visual preferences when using the application. Several backgrounds are available as well as poster cards, note cards, and other graphical designs. Furthermore, the user can import an image that he/she wishes to use. The application is completely customizable, giving users the feeling that they "own" the application.

The Modify Signature File functions:

6.1 Enable Signature File

6.2 Disable Signature File

6.3 Create Signature File

6.4 Modify Existing Signature File

Signature files are text files that are appended to the end of every message a user sends. These files are useful to users who wish to send a quote, place contact information, or include other information on every outgoing message. Signature files do not need to be used, thus the application provides the ability to choose between using or not using a signature file.

The Modify Address Book functions:

7.1 Add New Folder

7.2 Compose to Highlighted Address/Folder

7.3 Add Address(es)

7.4 Item Placement

7.5 Delete Folder

7.6 Delete Address

The address book is an important feature of any e-mail application. The application presents the user with a clean, easy-to-use interface for creating, storing, and manipulating e-mail addresses. Each address is treated as a business card, or data sheet, and contains the addressee's name, e-mail address, telephone number, fax number, house or business address, and notes about the addressee. Each of these address card fields are provided by the user, or taken from a received message, i.e. an e-mail address. In addition to providing individual address organization, the application provides the ability to create folders to hold addresses. The folders can be used in such a way that they group those addresses with something in common. For example, a particular user may have several friends, business associates, and family members with whom they correspond via e-mail. An address folder can be created for each category of correspondent—a folder for friends, a folder for business associates, and a folder for family members can be created.

The Modify Filters functions:

8.1 Create New Filter

8.2 Delete Existing Filter

8.3 Modify Existing Filter

8.4 Create Inbox Folder

An advanced feature of many e-mail applications local to the user's machine is the ability to filter incoming messages. The user can create a filter that applies a rule to incoming messages. Messages that pass the tests set up by these rules are then placed into the designated folder contained in the Inbox. The ability to create message filters requires the ability to create folders in the Inbox directly from the filter setup (in case the folder hasn't already been created).

The Vacation Reply functions:

9.1 Enable Reply

9.2 Modify Reply Message

9.3 Disable Reply

"Vacation reply" is a feature that can be activated or deactivated as the user desires. A user can use the vacation reply program on the mail server to respond to incoming messages while the user is away. If the user is on vacation, or out of town for a few days, the user can enable the vacation reply program from the application, tell the program what the reply is to be, and then turn it off when they return. As an advanced feature, EMC's reply program understands the concept of time, and can be preset to disable itself. Reply messages sent by the vacation reply program cannot be signed or encrypted.

The Web-based and client-side implementations of the application are inherently different. One runs on the Web, and the other on the user's local machine. The differences between the states of operation arise primarily from the fact that the Web-based application has a different operating environment than the downloaded application. The downloaded, client-side application simply downloads to the user's machine once, and is then run when the user wants to generate or read his/her e-mail. The user connects to the Internet when he/she wants to check for or read his/her mail at the server. This implementation can contain and process all necessary information completely on the local machine. On the other hand, the Web-based application cannot behave this way because of bandwidth constraints and for other reasons.

This implementation of the application (known as "client-side") is run within a single frame (see FIG. 5). That is, when

the user launches the application, a single window appears, and nearly all operations performed by the application take place within this window. The window contains a title bar, menu bar, selection buttons, three radio buttons, three checkboxes, three subwindows, and an Interactive Help Panel. The organization of the title and menu bars is familiar to users, in that the elements are located at the top of the window and span the width of the window.

The selection buttons are "Create," "Send," and "Retrieve Messages" (FIG. 5). The Create button permits the user to compose an outgoing message. The Send button permits the user to send a message that has just been composed, and the Retrieve Messages button instructs the application to check for new messages on the mail server(s). The three subwindows consist of a folder window, a larger, primary window, and a medium-sized, viewer window. The folder window is small and displays the various message folders that the user has available. The larger window is a dynamic window that may contain the composition of a message, a dialog with the user, or other functions. The medium-sized window is for displaying message headers, account information (if in the e-mail account book), and address information from the address book (if in the address book).

The three checkboxes provide the application with knowledge of the user's cryptography/compression preferences for the current composition. The three radio buttons are used to toggle among the address book, the account book, and the message book.

The Interactive Help Panel at the lower right of the image is used to help guide the user through the use of the application. The goal of the Interactive Help Panel is to give the user information pertaining to the current state of the application without being "in the way" with extra windows and/or unnecessary dialog boxes. The Interactive Help Panel is described in detail below.

The user interface is graphical and is organized as shown in FIG. 5 and later figures. This interface was created using Visual Basic, although other languages can be used. The sub-windows are referred to, beginning with the top-most window and moving clockwise, as one, two, and three. Thus, the third window is the largest window (where "Application Logo placed here" is shown), the second window is the one just above the Interactive Help Panel, and the first window has a vertical scroll bar.

The menu bar contains four menus: File, Address Book, Account Book, and Help. Each menu is explored below in some detail.

The Interactive Help Panel ("IHP") is displayed in the lower right hand corner of the application window. The purpose of the IHP is to give the user useful tips, hints, and suggestions when using the application. This panel is also used for user prompting, especially when the user is about to perform a "destructive" act, such as modifying a message filter, or deleting an address sheet. Each display of the IHP also includes a toggle switch that, when selected, will disable that particular suggestion. Entering the preferences option from the file menu on the menu bar resets the IHP.

The File menu (FIG. 5, top line) contains nine sub-menus: exit, get messages, create, preferences, compress/decompress folder, display, filters, certificate book, and print. This menu option provides some miscellaneous functions of the applications that don't fit in the other menu options.

If exit is chosen from the File menu, the application determines what state it is currently in. If the application is in the compose state, the user is prompted to save the current draft to the Draft List from the Interactive Help Panel. If the

application is currently viewing a message, then the application simply shuts down. If the application is in a running state, that is if it is currently performing some operation such as encryption of an outgoing message, the ability to exit is not available. This prevents the user from exiting during the execution of a critical process.

The "get messages" option initiates the process of checking for and receiving any new messages that are on the mail server(s). If the application is currently performing another process, this option is not available to the user.

The "create" option initiates the applications composer. The composer is fully described below. This option is unavailable when the application is performing another operation.

The Compress | Decompress Folder option from the File menu places a dialog box in window three of the application, as in FIG. 6. The dialog shows the status of the user's Message Book in a hierarchical fashion. The user can select (highlight) a folder and then compress that folder. When the message is compressed, it is saved in an alphanumeric fashion. As an example, if the Sent List were to be selected, the saved (compressed) file would be "sent1.cmp". The folder would then be replaced with a new one. The new folder assumes the same name as the folder that was compressed. The dialog appears as shown in the image of FIG. 6. The user can delete as many folders as is desired or none at all.

From this dialog, the user may also decompress previously compressed folders. A list of previously compressed folders is shown in the text box labeled "Archive List" in the lower left-hand corner of the screen. To decompress a folder, the user first highlights the archived folder from the Archive List text box and then selects the "Decompress" button. When a file containing a folder is decompressed, the entire folder is placed within the current folder that replaced it when it was compressed. If that folder has been deleted or is otherwise not in existence, the application places the decompressed folder as a subfolder of the inbox.

As an example, when the Draft List is archived and labeled as the file "draft1.cmp", where the "cmp" extension represents a compression file, the application creates a new Draft List to replace the old one. When draft1.cmp is decompressed, a new folder is created in the Draft List named "Draft List 1", and the messages/folder listings that were contained in the compressed file is placed in this new folder. This option is not available if the application is currently running a process. To quit this operation, the user selects the "Done" button, which returns the application to the previous state of operation.

The Preferences selection places a new display in the third window of the application (see FIG. 7). The preferences dialog allows the user to set certain defaults and to reinstate the Interactive Help Panel (if any of the options were previously disabled). Default preferences are set upon installation of the application. If the user has obtained a digital certificate, then the "encrypt" and "sign" options are set in addition to the other pre-set options. These pre-set options are outgoing compression and the Interactive Help Panel.

The user can select the options that he/she prefers. If a user doesn't wish to use the Interactive Help Panel, that option can be disabled by checking the checkbox "Interactive Help Panel Settings" heading. In order to restore the Interactive Help Panel to the default functionality, the user would click the "Reset Interactive Help Panel" button. The user also has the availability to enable/disable encryption, digital signatures, attachment compression, signature file appending, and outgoing message options. When the user is

finished selecting and/or deselecting the available options, he/she may exit the preferences display by selecting the "Exit Preferences" button. When this button is pressed, the application moves to the prior state of the application. That is, if the user was in a different state, such as composition, that state would return to the display, assuming the exact information that was there when the user entered the preferences state. It is important to note that the selection of certain options from the preferences display does not affect the previous state of the application. Thus, if the user was composing a message before entering the preferences state, and then changed the encryption settings, these changes would be noticed, not on the current composition, but on the next composition.

The View Certificates component allows the user to view and control the various certificates that are stored in the certificate book (FIG. 8). The user can view certificate information, revoke certificates, and determine those certificate authorities that they trust.

The dialog, as displayed in the third window of the application, contains a text box, instructions, and seven buttons. The four buttons lined along the top of the text box display certificate listings for various entities: Certificate Authorities (CAs), other people, the user's certificate, and the Certificate Revocation List (CRL). When one of these buttons is selected, the text box of the dialog displays the appropriate certificates to the user as a list. To view a certificate, the user highlights that certificate within the text box and then clicks the "View" button. Then the certificate information replaces the certificate list. The user also is able to revoke certificates by first highlighting the certificate from a list presented in the text box, then clicking the "Revoke" button. When the user is finished with the certificate book, he/she clicks "Done" to return to the previous state. That is, if the user was composing a message when they entered the certificate book, then that composition reappears when the user exits the certificate book.

The Display option gives the user the ability to change the appearance of the application in general. Options include any images that are available on the application, as well as windowing properties (i.e. frame color, etc.).

Selection of the "Filters" option from the file menu displays a filter dialog in the third window of the application (FIG. 9). This dialog allows the user to create, modify, and/or delete existing e-mail filters.

The user adds a message filter by entering a filter name, the constraint field of the filter, what the field should contain in order to be filtered, and a folder in which to place the messages meeting the requirements of the filter. The constraint fields are those fields found in the header of an e-mail message, such as "to", "from", and "cc". The user can select any number of containments for the field, the most common being either part or all of an e-mail address. The pull down menu lists the current folders in the Message Book, and contains a selection that allows the user to create a new folder from within this display. This display cannot be entered if the application is currently running a critical function.

The address book menu (in the top line of the tool bar) contains one sub-menu: modify. The address book is displayed (FIG. 10) in terms of Address Sheets and Address Lists in the second window of the application, and the dialog for manipulating the address book is shown in the third window of the application.

The Modify option is not available to the user if the application is currently running a process. Selecting the Modify option brings up a dialog box that guides the user

through the process of adding, modifying, and/or deleting an address to the address list, which is displayed to the right in the second window of the application (FIG. 10). As the image indicates, the user is able to both add and modify address sheets for correspondents directly from this dialog box as well as add and/or delete address folders. If the user wishes to add an address to the Address Book, he/she enters the relevant information in the text boxes labeled, Name, E-mail, Phone, Fax, Address Fields, and Notes. Then the user selects the address folder in which to place the new address from the pull down list located in the lower center area of the GUI. To complete adding the new address, the user simply clicks the "Add to:" button.

If the user would want to modify an existing address, he/she first highlights the address name shown in the second window of the application (far right). When he/she highlights the address listing, the user then sees the full information for that address appear in the text boxes of the dialog box. The user can then make the appropriate changes to the information, and then click the "Add to:" button to replace the old address with the new one. A prompt is placed in the Interactive Help Panel before the old address is actually replaced, to confirm the user's desire to perform that action. When the user is finished modifying the address book, he/she can exit the dialog by selecting "Done". When this button is selected, the application moves back to its previous state. Thus, if the user was composing a message, then the composer is displayed with the previous information contained in that display maintained.

The pull down list that displays the current folders has an option that allows the user to type a new folder directly into that box. Then, when the user presses the "Add to:" button, this folder is created, and then the new address is placed into that folder. This method of adding a folder to the address book can also be used to create a folder containing no new address. When the user wants to add only an address folder, then he/she leaves all of the text boxes blank, types the name of the new folder in the pull-down menu, and then clicks the "Add To:" button.

Furthermore, if the user wants to delete an address from the Address Book, he/she first highlights the address in the second window of the application, and then clicks on the "Delete Selection" button below the "Notes:" text box. The application then prompts the user via the Interactive Help Panel to ensure that the user would like to carry out this action.

The Account Book selection (in the top line of the tool bar) also contains just one sub-menu: modify. The e-mail account book is displayed in terms of Account Sheets and Account Lists in the second window of the application.

When the Modify option is selected, the application displays the dialog box of FIG. 11. If the application is currently running a critical process, then this option is not available to the user until that process is complete. This dialog box guides the user through the process of adding/deleting/modifying an existing e-mail account, and/or adding/deleting a folder to the account book.

When the user wants to add a new e-mail account to his or her account book, then the user first enters the appropriate information in the supplied text boxes labeled: User name, Password, and Server. The user name field holds the user's name on that account, the password field holds the password the user must supply to access the account, and the server field holds the name of the server on which the account resides. The password field is "blind," that is, rather than printing what the user types, the only characters that show up are asterisks (*). When the user wants to modify an

account (as when the user has modified the password), then the user is required to highlight the account in the account list displayed at left. When this is done, the account information is placed into the appropriate text boxes. When the user wants to delete an account or folder, the user first highlights the account, then clicks on the delete button.

When the user would like to create a new folder, he/she uses the pull down menu to type a new folder name. The user needn't supply account information to create a new folder, although this option is available in the event the user would like to place a new account in a new folder. In this, and every case listed above, the user is prompted by the Interactive Help Panel at the lower right of the application to confirm the addition/deletion operation.

When the user is finished manipulating the Account Book, then the user must select the "Done" button to exit the display and return to the previous state of operation. Thus, if the user was composing a message, the composer is displayed having maintained all of the information the user may have entered into that display.

The Help menu (top line of the tool bar) contains an online help reference, a brief tutorial, and an "about" section that lists that application's version, completion date, etc. If the application is currently executing a critical process, then these options are not available until the process is complete.

The Tutorial option brings up a dialog box as in the preceding examples, but provides one large text box with a chapter listing, back and forward buttons, and an exit button. The layout of the dialog is similar to the one displayed in FIG. 12, and the text of the tutorial is shown in the large text box. The user is able to view the different chapters of the tutorial, or view an index (this option is included in the chapter pull down menu). When in each chapter, the user is able to utilize the back and forward buttons to move either forward or back a page. If the user selects the exit button, then the application closes the tutorial and automatically returns to the start state.

When the Online Help option is selected, an online index appears in the third window of the application. At the user's disposal is an index of common words/features/lists/terms or other useful "guiding" words that the user may want to search for. When the user highlights one of these options in the index, the help listings from the tutorial are displayed below so the user can select one of the options.

The About selection displays information regarding the current version of the application. The information is displayed in the Interactive Help Panel so that no other option or operation is disrupted. Included in the About display is the version number of the application, the date of its release, and contact information (including Web information). This option is not available when the application is running a critical process.

The Create button (second line of the tool bar) brings up the composition screen (FIG. 13). This screen is placed into the third window of the application. The preferences are read such that the application understands the user's desire to encrypt, sign, and/or compress the outgoing message or its attachment, if any. This button does not operate if the application is currently running a critical process. This screen is where the user composes outgoing messages. When the user is satisfied with the composition and is finished editing the composition, the user presses the "Send" button (described below) to complete the action. Five additional buttons are shown: Attach File, Save as Draft, Signature File, Spell Check, and Cancel.

The Attach File button, when clicked (on the tool bar in the frame), brings up a dialog box (the only separate window

used by the application) in order to allow the user to select a file that he/she wishes to attach. The file can be of any type and size, if the user has the proper permissions to access and download the file. The dialog box that this option displays is a familiar Windows file dialog box. It supplies a directory tree, a name field, a pull down menu of available disk drives, etc. When a file is attached, it is placed into a buffer and waits for the send or "Save as Draft" button to be selected for proper handling. When the user has completed selection of the desired attachment, the file dialog exits and the user may continue editing the composition. This option is not operational if the application is currently running a critical process.

If the user selects the "Save as Draft" button, then the application acts as though it is sending the message, but rather than sending the message over the Internet to the desired address, the message is placed in the Draft folder of the Message Book. Thus, the message and any attachment(s) are properly formatted for sending, including any encryption, signature, and/or compression requirements. When the application is finished with this operation, the start state of the application is displayed.

A user, by selecting the Signature File button, from the top line of the Composer frame tool bar, can create and/or manipulate a signature file as well as enable or disable the option to append a signature file to outgoing messages (see FIG. 14). This option requires that a new dialog box be shown to the user. As such, the old dialog box (FIG. 13) is hidden rather than closed, so that the user does not lose any information already placed in the composition of the message. This option is not available when the application is currently running a critical process. This display is a simple one that provides the user with some instruction. If a signature file has been created, then the application displays that file in the text box (contained in the third window of the application). If the user has not yet created a signature file, then the user can create one by entering the desired signature in the text box, then clicking on Create Signature. This action makes the file available to the application by saving the file to disk.

If the user has already created a signature file, but wishes to modify that signature file, then the user first makes modifications, then selects the Modify Signature button to save those changes. When the user would want to enable or disable the signature file, then he/she marks the checkbox. If the box is marked, the file is enabled. If the user would like to exit with or without making changes to the signature file and its operation, then the user simply clicks on the Return button to go back to the Create display.

The Cancel option provides the user a way to exit a composition. When this option is selected, the display returns to the application's start state, and all information regarding the current composition is lost. This option is not available to the user if the application is currently running a critical process.

When the user selects the "Retrieve Messages" button from the second line of the tool bar (FIGS. 5-14, second line of tool bar), the application gets messages from the user's various e-mail accounts. The first account to be checked is the account found on the EMC server. If the user has other accounts listed in his or her e-mail account book, these will be checked in the order in which the user entered them. Note that only default accounts will be checked automatically. Any other accounts must be checked for messages manually. For each account that is checked, the message filter will be invoked. The state of the application remains the same except for the second window, which changes to display the message book.

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The Encrypt | Sign | Compress check-box options (FIGS. 5-14, second line of tool bar) allow the user to select, for each composition, the appropriate action for the application to take when sending a composed message. When the application is run, the preferences of the user are read and these options would be run accordingly. The availability of the options at the time of composition provides the user with the ability to change his or her mind for each message. If an option is marked, then it is enabled. Thus, if the Encrypt option is checked, the next outgoing message is encrypted. If the user changes any of these options for a given message, then the application changes the options to such preferences after the current composition is sent, saved as a draft, or canceled.

The Address Book | Account Book | Message Book radio buttons (FIGS. 5-14, second line of tool bar) allow the user to toggle between the Account, Address, and Message Books. Only one option can be displayed at any one time. These are shown in the second window of the application in a hierarchical fashion. If the user would want to return to the Message Book, he/she highlights a folder in the first window of the application. These options are not available if the application is currently running a critical process.

The user can bring up the Address Book or Account Book dialog when he/she double clicks on a particular address or account or folder. If the user would like to send an e-mail message directly from the address book, the user first highlights that address (or address folder for a "bulk" mailing), then selects the "Create" button contained in the main window of the application. If the application is currently in another state, such as the composition state, then that display is simply hidden from view rather than destroyed. Similarly, the user is able to view any message from the Message Book by double clicking on that message in the message book. This displays the Message Book Display as previously described.

The Web-based application cannot be contained in a single unit, per se, as the client-side application is. Rather, the application spans from the client to the server. Known Web-based e-mail providers have not had, or even attempted to implement, security measures such as the X.509 certificate standard. In the case of the Web-based application of the present invention, the application runs as a distributed system. That is, the application controls are sent to the user to be viewed on the user's browser, and through these controls the user operates the application that resides on the server.

The functioning of the Web-based application takes place primarily on the server side of the application, and the controls are passed through a secure channel using the Secure Sockets Layer protocol ("SSL"), or some other security protocol offering a secure "pipe" to and from the application level. Thus, all certificate information and initial message information is secured on the user's account as it exists on the mail server. This approach provides a fully accessible, secure e-mail application that the user can utilize from any web-enabled computer anywhere in the world, within legal boundaries.

Some components of the application must be ported to the user's machine at each mail session, such as the compression tools. The porting of this component minimizes the bandwidth usage of the user from the local machine. Depending upon size, some other components may be downloaded to the browser on a per-session basis. Often, users of Web-based e-mail wish to place attachments on their outgoing mail and/or download messages that they have received for printing or some other purpose. The Web-based application

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running in the browser provides a way for the user to access and download messages to his or her local machine, as well as upload attachments for sending. The user also has the capability to download messages to the local machine and store them in a provided message book.

In use and operation, a premium-service subscriber to the EMC service, User A in FIG. 1, has a choice of accessing his e-mail through either his personal computer A or through another computer X, as shown. Computer A has the EMC program loaded onto it, and computer X does not. User A can use computer A to compose a message, to add any attachments, to set the encryption of the message and the encryption and compression or not of any attachments, etc., and to sign the message digitally or not, all while off-line. To send the message and any others, and to check and receive any messages sent to him by others, he/she connects over a telephone or cable line, or any other hard-wired or wireless connection, to his ISP's Server I. That server is licensed by the present inventors and also has the EMC system installed. Server I confirms the identity and digital signature of the subscriber and accepts the message uploaded from Computer A along with any attachments. User A can use computer A from home or the office or on any other Internet connection, as when he/she is travelling with a laptop or notebook computer A.

If User A is away from home or office and cannot use his Computer A, he/she still can send and receive e-mail with all the information and options of his home Computer A. He/she need only log onto Server I from any computer with suitable hardware and software, as Computers X or Z as shown. Computer X connects to his own Server I, while Computer Z connects to a Server III, as shown, which does not have EMC loaded or licensed, but does practice the S/MIME protocol. In either case User A logs into Server I using his user and/or identification name(s) and password; if he/she is on Server III he/she merely needs to access Server I through the Internet. He/she is able to compose mail on-line, and receive mail, with all the same encryption, authentication, etc. features, settings, and organization as he/she had on his own Computer A.

A message sent by User A to another EMC subscriber, as User B, is routed from the Computer A or Computer X through Server I and over the Internet (and possibly over or through other servers there) to a Server II of User B. It is stored there, in the EMC Web system application, with any attachments and in any encrypted form used by User A, until User B logs on to retrieve that message. If User B uses his/her regular Computer B with EMC loaded, he/she may download the message, have it automatically decrypted, and any attachments decompressed, if necessary, for reading off-line. If User B uses a different computer, as Computer Y, through Server II, he/she must remain on-line to read the message, although it will be decrypted and any attachments decompressed for her by Server II as part of the EMC program and service.

A message sent by User A to a non-EMC subscriber, as User C, is routed from Computer A or Computer X through Server I and over the Internet (and possibly over or through other servers there) to a Server III of User C. It is stored there, in the Web-based e-mail application of User C (as Hotmail®), with any attachments and in any encrypted form used by User A, until User C logs on to retrieve that message. Whether User C uses his regular Computer C or another Computer Z, neither one having EMC loaded, he/she may download the message and have it automatically decrypted under the S/MIME protocol. However, for any attachments that are compressed, User C must go to a

different program to decompress and read them. If User C has a client-side e-mail system (as Eudora®), he/she would download the message and attachments and can then read and otherwise manipulate them off-line.

If User A wants to send a message to a user not on a secure server or computer, i.e., not using S/MIME or similar protocol, he/she may do so, but the message and attachments will not be encrypted (User A will be warned of this by the EMC system). Interoperability is an important feature of this invention, so that subscribers can communicate electronically to all other persons, not just to those on a particular system.

To receive e-mail messages from others, User A opens his client-side program on Computer A, or logs into Server I from any other Computer X or Z connected to any Server. He/she downloads the messages to his Computer A, or reads them on-line on the other Computer X or Z. The messages are decrypted automatically, attachments are decompressed automatically if necessary, and other features of the EMC program are implemented for him, since he/she is tied into Server I, which runs the web-side EMC system.

Many variations may be made in the invention as shown and its manner of use without departing from the principles of the invention as pictured and described herein and claimed as our invention. "Personal computer" as used herein refers to computers of all manufacturers and operating systems, whether PC, Apple, Unix, Java, Wintel, etc. Minor variations will not avoid the use of the invention.

We claim as our invention:

1. A method of providing a secure electronic messaging service to each of a plurality of subscribers, using a server and a personal computer both connected to a global computer network, the method comprising the steps:

programming each of a server application and a personal computer application with a secure e-mail messaging service configured to interact with and to shadow the other application via said network as to personal information, settings, and files of an individual one of said subscribers;

storing said information, settings, and files both on said server and on said personal computer running said application, for access off-line solely through the personal computer of said subscriber and for access on-line by said subscriber through any computer having capability to communicate with said server;

allowing access to said messaging service via said server for a subscriber's sending and receiving electronic messages; and

providing a digital certificate security service from each of the server and the computer together with the messaging service.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein the step of accessing the server of the messaging service from a personal computer using the Web-based form of service further comprises the step of using an S/MIME compliant application to connect between the computer and said server.

3. The method of claim 1, wherein the step of providing a digital signature security service includes verifying the identity of the sender, the integrity of the message, and the fact of the sending by the sender.

4. The method of claim 1, further including the step of decompressing automatically a compressed attachment to a message upon its reaching and being opened by a subscriber.

5. A method of providing secure e-mail service to a subscriber, the service being accessible equally from an e-mail program on a computer of the subscriber and via the Internet (a global computer network) from other computers which may be used by the subscriber, the method comprising the steps:

loading the e-mail program onto the subscriber's computer, the program being one for composing and

displaying e-mail messages thereon while the computer is off-line, using personal information, settings, and files of the subscriber and for providing at least one of address, e-mail account, and message book features;

providing an e-mail service on an Internet server accessible by said subscriber, the service and the program on the subscriber's computer each shadowing the content of the other for said personal information, settings, and files of the subscriber and for each of the address, account, and message books of the subscriber;

allowing access to the e-mail service on said subscriber's computer and from any other computer via a modem or the Internet;

synchronizing and updating the personal information, settings, and files of the subscriber and the features and content in the subscriber's program and in the e-mail service on the Internet server upon each access of the subscriber's computer to the Internet server and e-mail service after a change in either, and

providing from each of the e-mail server and the user's computer, with one or more messages a digital signature security service for verifying the identity of the sender, the integrity of the messages sent, and the fact of the sending by the sender,

whereby to provide nearly identical, secure e-mail services to the subscriber whether the subscriber is using his/her own computer which is running the application or is logged-in to the server from a different computer through the Internet.

6. The method of claim 5, wherein the step of accessing the e-mail service from a computer other than the subscriber's computer further comprises the step of using an S/MIME compliant application to connect between the other computer and the server.

7. The method of claim 5, further comprising the step of decompressing any compressed attachment automatically when it reaches and is opened by a subscriber.

8. A secure, encrypted, digitally-certified e-mail service application for a personal computer that is also accessible for similar use over a global computer network, the service application comprising:

a full-featured e-mail program for loading onto a subscriber's personal computer, the program configured to receive personal information, settings, and files of the subscriber and having at least one of address book, e-mail account book, and message book files provided therein;

a network-based e-mail service system configured to shadow the subscriber's e-mail program as to content and having the same ones of address book, account book, and message book files as said program on said personal computer, the system synchronizing and updating itself and the program on the personal computer as and after either is changed and upon connecting the subscriber's personal computer to the e-mail service system via a modem or the network, and

means for providing a digital signature security service directly from either of the subscriber's computer or the network server, the signature service verifying the identity of the sender, the integrity of the message, and the fact of the sending by the subscriber.

9. The e-mail service application of claim 8, wherein the server of the e-mail service is configured for access to any computer used by the subscriber using an S/MIME compliant application.

10. The e-mail service application of claim 8, wherein the service further is configured to decompress any compressed attachment automatically when it reaches and is opened by the subscriber.

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US006449255B1

(12) **United States Patent**
Waclawsky

(10) **Patent No.:** **US 6,449,255 B1**
(45) **Date of Patent:** **Sep. 10, 2002**

(54) **METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR
MANAGING PACKETS USING A REAL-TIME
FEEDBACK SIGNAL**

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(*) **Notice:** Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this
patent is extended or adjusted under 35
U.S.C. 154(b) by 0 days.

(21) **Appl. No.:** **09/299,324**

(22) **Filed:** **Apr. 26, 1999**

(51) **Int. Cl.⁷** **H04L 12/26**

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **370/236; 370/249; 370/252;
370/395.4**

(58) **Field of Search** **370/229, 230,
370/230.1, 232, 235, 235.1, 236, 249, 252,
253, 395.4, 395.41, 412; 709/223, 224,
225, 226**

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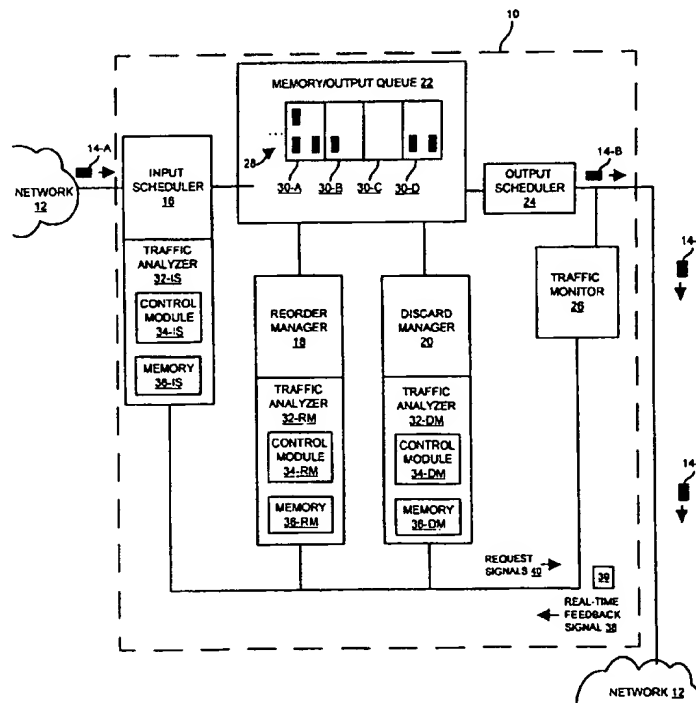
Primary Examiner—Ricky Ngo

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David E. Huang

(57) **ABSTRACT**

A technique manages packets in a data communications device having a memory using a real-time feedback signal. The technique involves transmitting an initial set of packets from the data communications device. The technique further involves monitoring transmission of the initial set of the packets from the data communications device, and providing the real-time feedback signal indicating transmission information regarding the initial set of packets. Additionally, the technique involves manipulating a new set of packets within the memory of the data communications device based on the real-time feedback signal, and transmitting the new set of packets from the data communications device based on how the new set of packets was manipulated within the memory of the data communications device. The use of the real-time feedback signal enables the data communications device to make on-the-fly adjustments to dynamically changing traffic patterns without the need for human intervention.

27 Claims, 7 Drawing Sheets



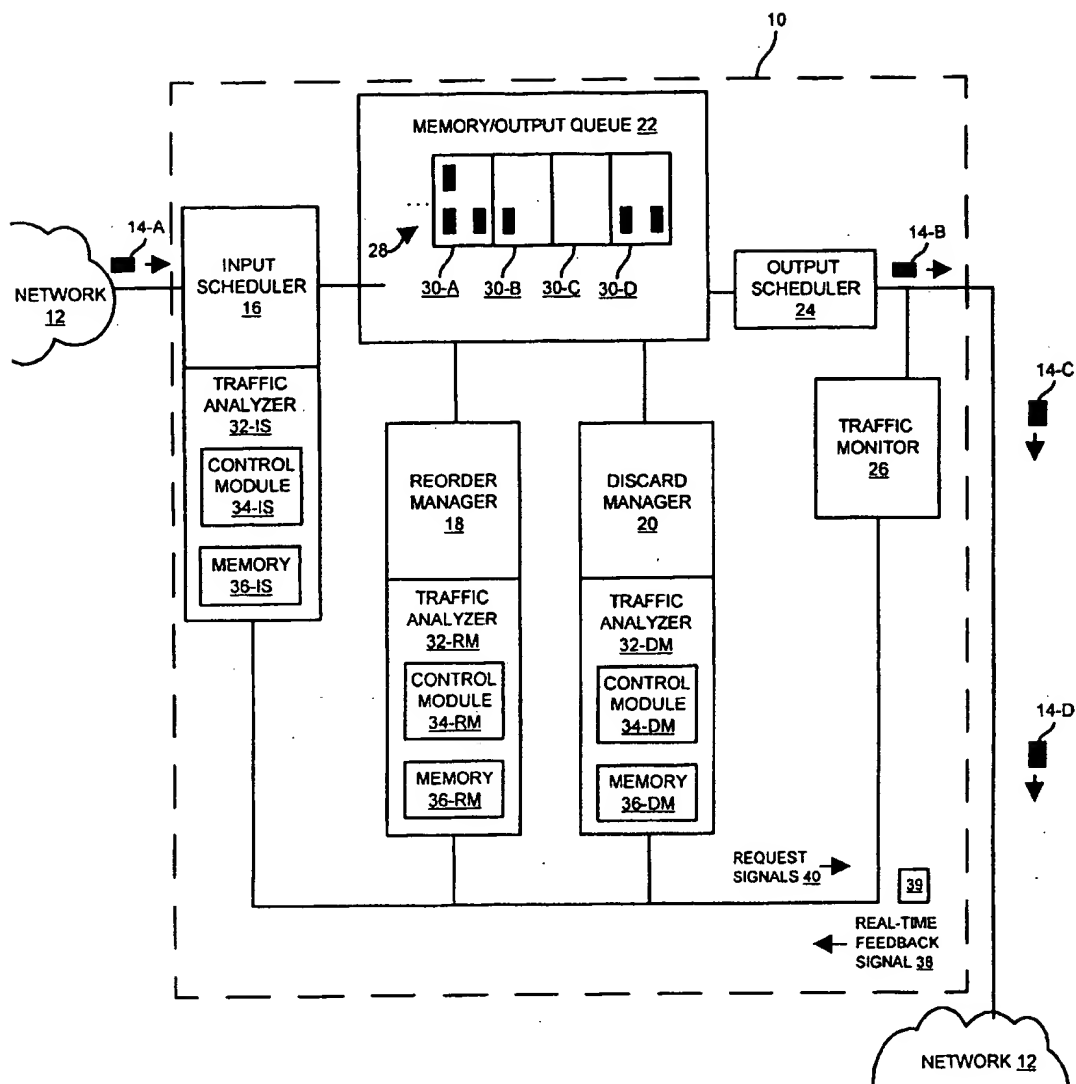


FIG. 1

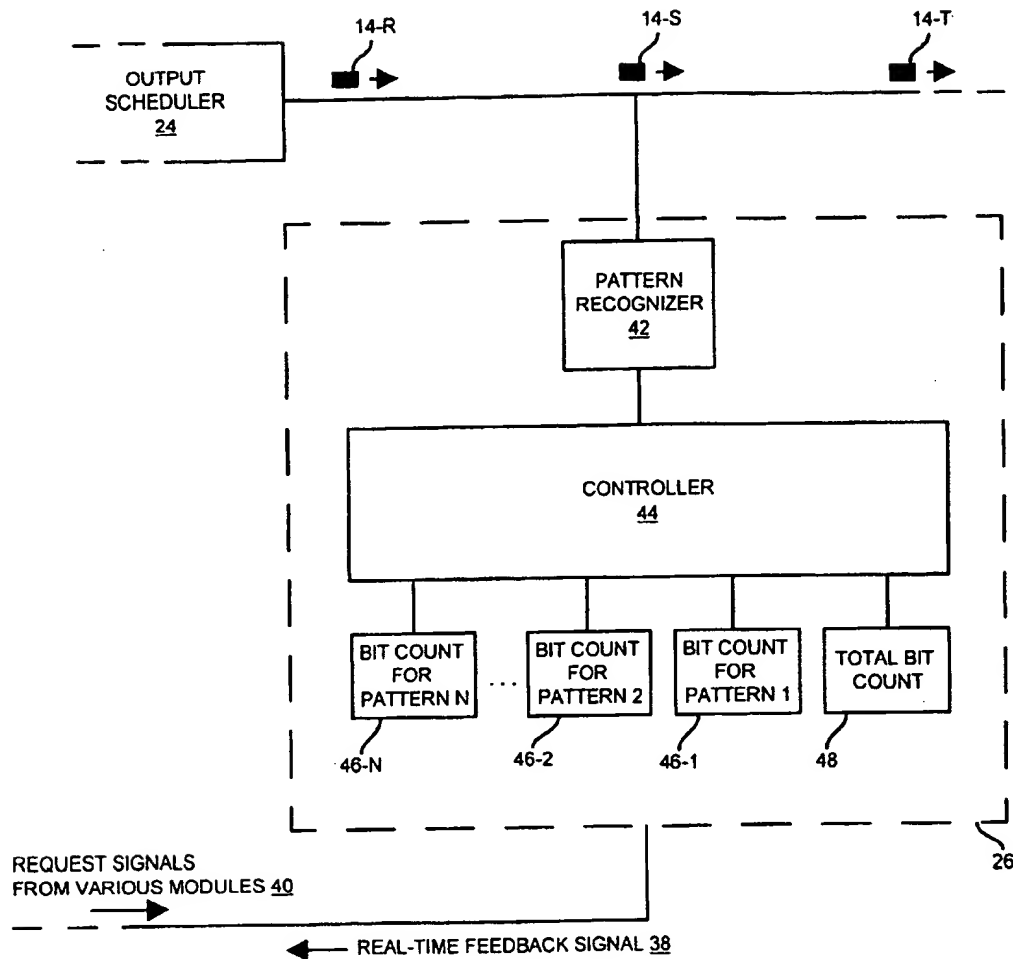


FIG. 2

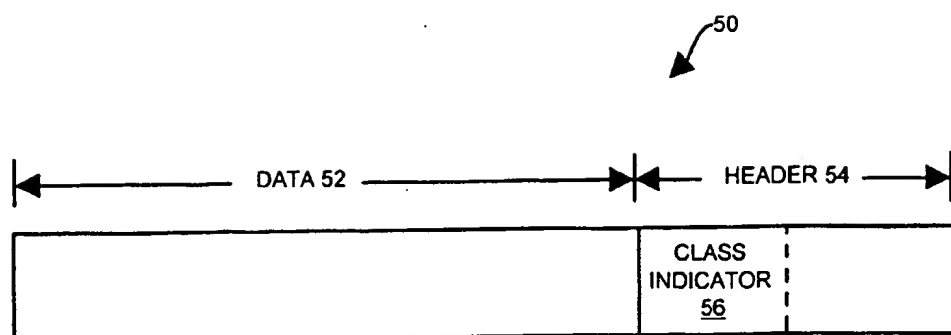


FIG. 3A

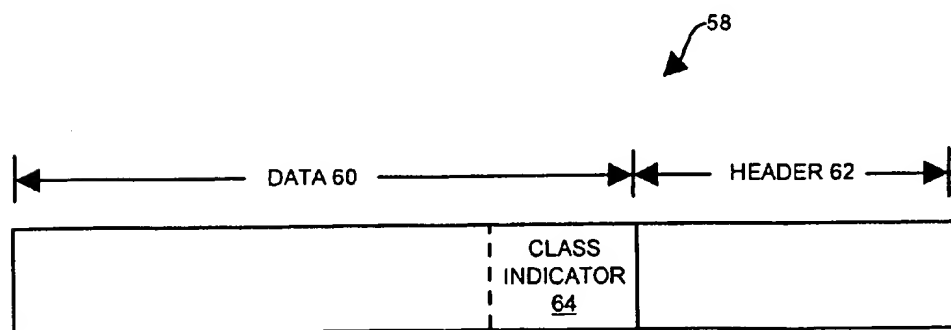


FIG. 3B

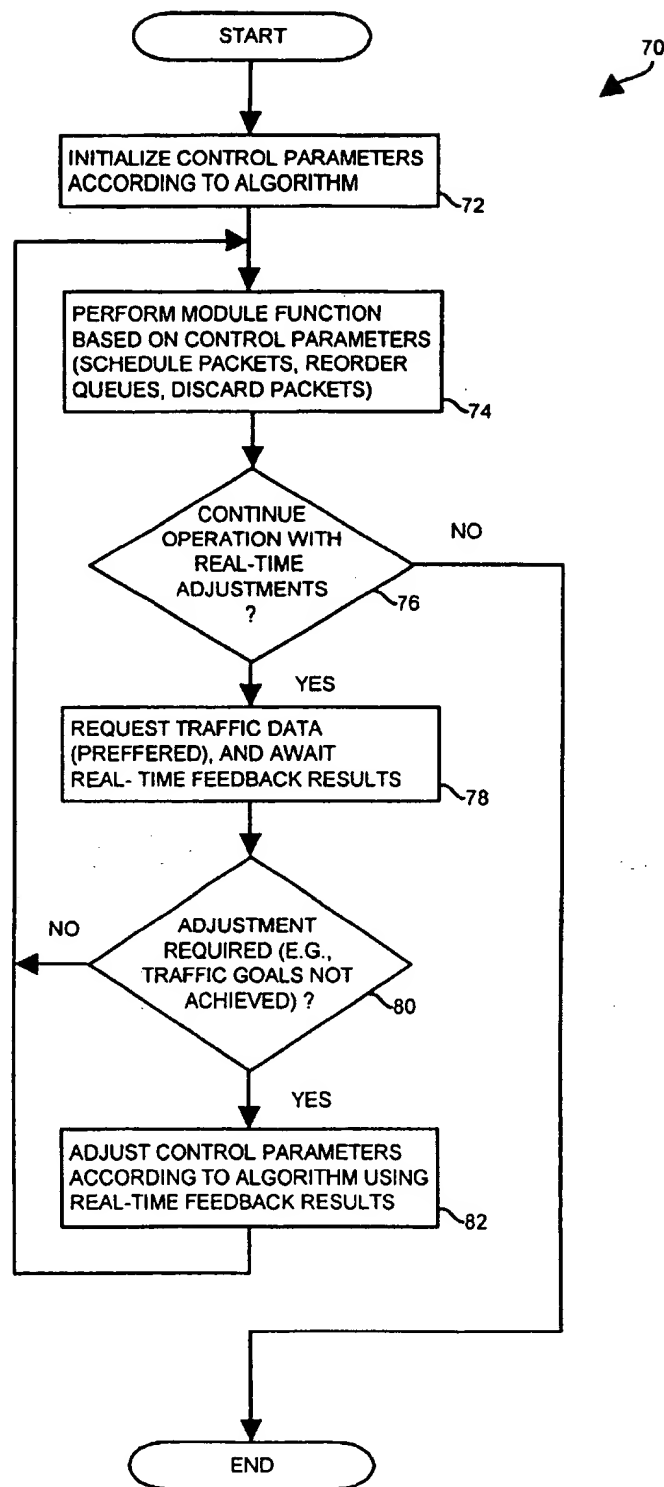


FIG. 4

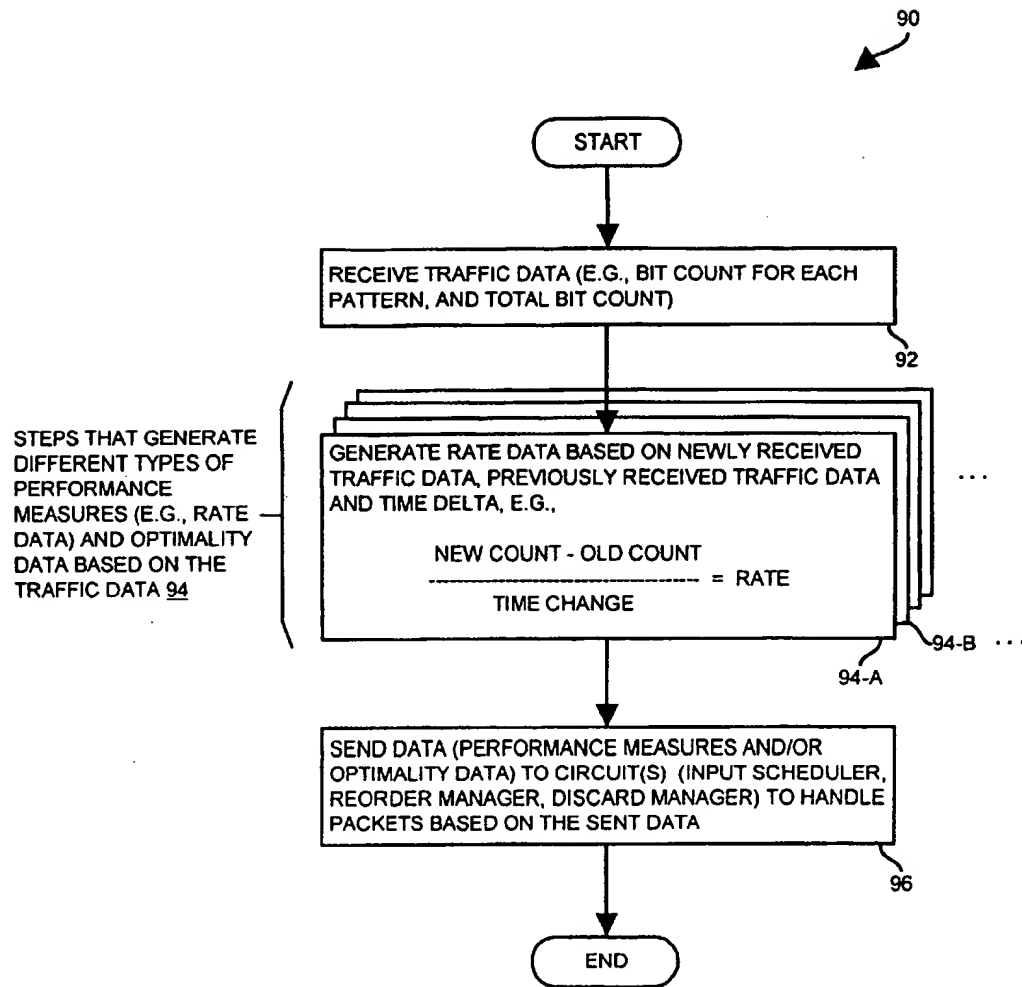


FIG. 5

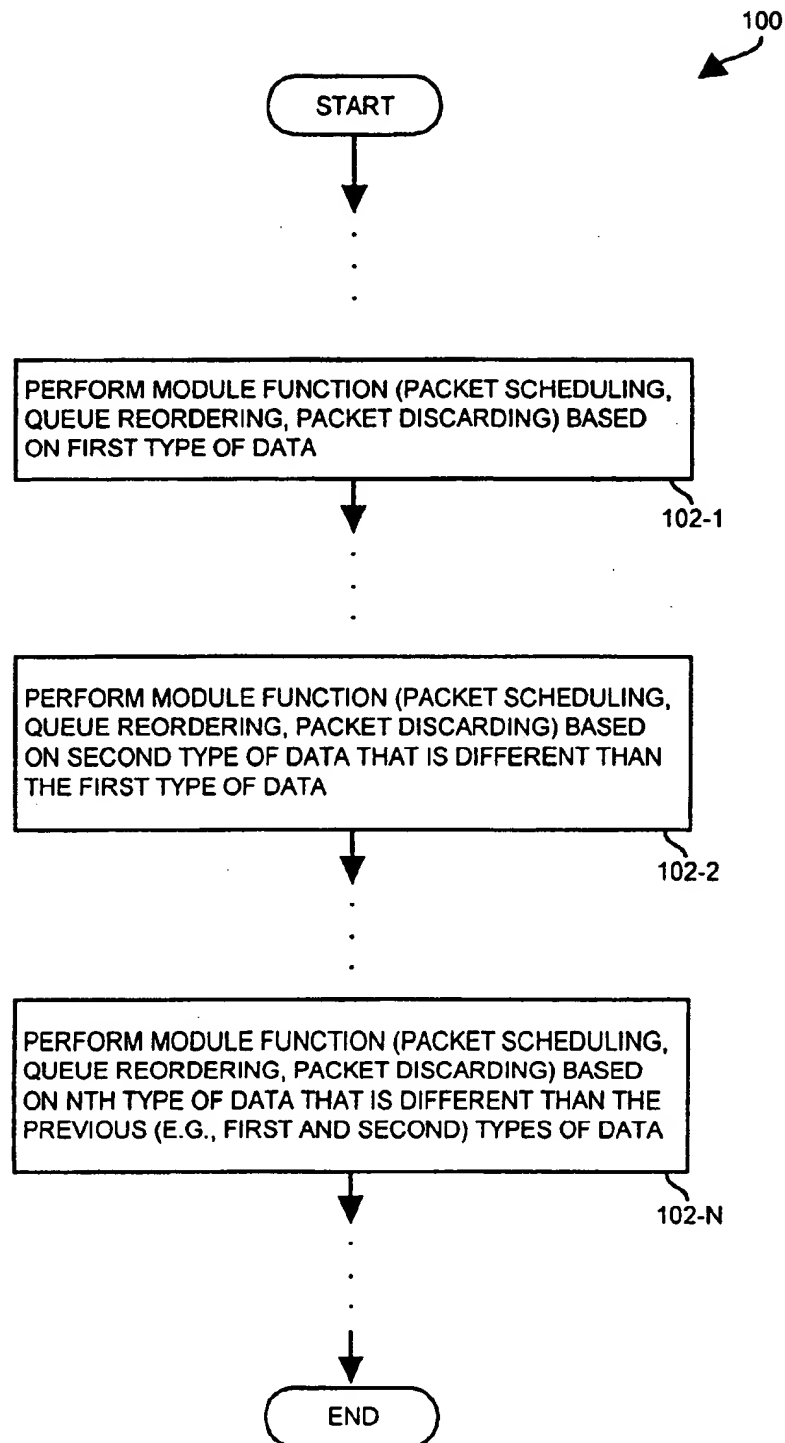


FIG. 6

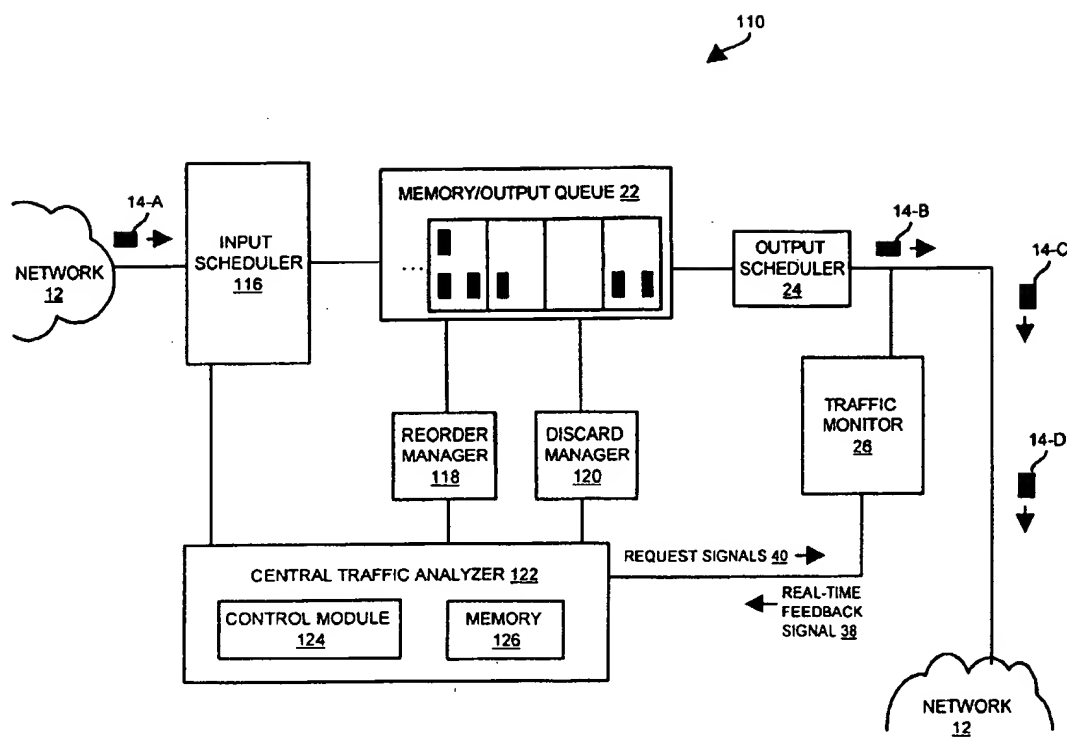


FIG. 7

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METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR MANAGING PACKETS USING A REAL-TIME FEEDBACK SIGNAL

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

A typical data communications network includes a number of host computers linked by one or more data communications devices coupled via any type of transmission media. Data is transmitted between one or more hosts on the network in the form of network packets or cells which typically have a predefined, standardized format.

In some networks, network packets are classified into different Quality of Service (QoS) classes which dictate how competing traffic flows are allocated resources which effects how quickly such packets travel from their sources to their destinations.

In such a network, data communications devices (e.g., routers and repeaters) typically receive and retransmit network packets based on the QoS classes of the packets. For example, in a network having video packets as a first QoS class and email packets (electronic mail) as a second QoS class, a network router may internally manage packets such that received video packets are retransmitted with less delay than email packets. As a result, network packet destinations (e.g., receiving hosts) generally perceive different responses, or Qualities of Service, for different QoS classes (e.g., faster video transmissions than email transmissions).

In a network which uses QoS classifications, data communications devices generally manage network packets internally according to packet management algorithms. Typically, in such a device, the algorithms provide control signals as a function of local network traffic data which has been accumulated and post-processed over an extended period of time. For example, a network router may operate in a particular manner based on local network traffic data, which has been accumulated and post-processed over several days, to enable the router to achieve QoS goals of transmitting received video packets with a maximum time delay of 100 ns and transmitting received email packets with a maximum time delay of 100 ms.

Typically, a person known as a network administrator is responsible for ensuring that a data communications device (e.g., the router) achieves its QoS goals. When the data communications device does not provide adequate QoS, the administrator analyzes the operation of the device relative to the local network traffic and attempts to improve the performance of the device to enable it to achieve its QoS goals. Furthermore, even if the device adequately achieves its QoS goals, the administrator may still attempt, on occasion, to further improve the performance of the device to enable it to more easily manage network packets and achieve its QoS goals.

When the administrator attempts to improve a data communication device's ability to manage network packets, the administrator typically studies the network traffic passing through the particular point where the device is connected to the network. For example, the administrator may connect a network packet monitor at the input of the data communications device to classify packet sizes, to count the number of packets in total or the number of packets of a particular QoS class received by the data communications device. Often, the administrator allows the monitor to accumulate this information over an extended period of time such as several hours or perhaps several days. For example, the monitor stores the size and count information in a computer file on a computer for future analysis.

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After the count information has been collected, the administrator generates particular network metrics from the count information. For example, the administrator may have logged the amount of time that elapsed while collecting the count information. Accordingly, the administrator can determine the overall packet rate provided by the data communications device by dividing the counted overall number of packets by the elapsed time. That is,

$$\text{overall packet rate} = \frac{\text{overall number of packets counted}}{\text{elapsed time}}$$

Similarly, the rate for a particular packet type can be determined by dividing the counted number of packets for a particular QoS class by the elapsed time. That is,

$$\text{packet rate for a particular} = \frac{\text{number of packets counted}}{\text{elapsed time}}$$

packet type for a particular QoS class

In this manner, the administrator determines the characteristics of the network traffic handled by the data communications device during the elapsed time period. This information along with packet size information can help improve understanding of the resource requirements of different traffic flows.

After the administrator has determined the network traffic characteristics of the elapsed time period, the administrator examines the settings of the data communications device. In particular, the administrator verifies that the operating parameters of the data communications device are set such that the device will manage packets correctly and efficiently in the future, if the device encounters network traffic having the same characteristics. For example, if the device is already set to handle such traffic correctly and efficiently, the administrator leaves the parameters unchanged or may change the parameters slightly with the hope of improving performance. However, if the device is not set to handle such traffic correctly and efficiently, the administrator modifies the parameters such that the device will handle the traffic correctly and efficiently in the future. The size of the output queues of the data communications device and the priority of different packet types are examples of parameters that the administrator may examine and perhaps adjust.

After the administrator has determined that the data communications device is properly set to manage packets correctly and efficiently and if the data communications device encounters new network traffic having different characteristics as previously encountered during the elapsed time period, the administrator may choose to subsequently repeat the above described procedure at some time in the future. For example, the administrator may (i) monitor the network traffic several days later to accumulate new size and count information, (ii) generate new network metrics using the new information, and (iii) then examine the settings of the data communications device relative to the newly generated network metrics.

Using the above-described technique, the data communications device is tuned to manage network packets correctly and efficiently with the assistance of human intervention by the network administrator. With an aggressive approach towards fine tuning the data communications device, the administrator may repeat the adjustment process a dozen or so times over the course of a several days.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In contrast to conventional network packet management techniques, the invention is directed to techniques for man-

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aging network packets in a data communications device using a real-time feedback signal. In one technique, a traffic monitor observes network packet traffic transmitted from an output of the data communications device, and generates the real-time feedback signal based on the observed traffic. The data communications device manages newly received packets according to the real-time feedback signal, i.e., according to the relatively instantaneously observed traffic, thus enabling the data communications device to perform real-time packet management and adjust to dynamically changing conditions within the network at a rapid pace.

One embodiment involves the use of a data communications device having a memory. The data communications device transmits an initial set of packets which are monitored by a traffic monitor. The traffic monitor then provides the real-time feedback signal indicating transmission information regarding the initial or previous set of packets. The data communications device manipulates (or handles) a new set of packets within its memory based on the real-time feedback signal, and transmits the new set of packets from the data communications device based on how the new set of packets was manipulated within the memory.

Preferably, each packet belongs to one of multiple packet classes, e.g., Quality of Service (QoS) classes such as video, audio, general data and best effort classes. Classes may also be defined by packet source, destination, or any other internal data in the packet, or by other information such as a physical location (e.g., port) on the device upon which the packet arrived. As such, the real-time feedback signal indicates transmission levels of the multiple packet classes for the initial set of packets. For example, the real-time feedback signal may indicate packet counts for each packet class in the initial set, and a total count for the number of packets in the initial set.

The memory of the data communications device preferably stores a queue structure. As such, the data communications device manipulates the new set of packets by scheduling each of the new set of packets in the queue structure based on the transmission levels of the multiple packet classes for the initial set of packets, as indicated by the real-time feedback signal. Alternatively, the device manipulates the new set of packets by reordering queues of the queue structure when the transmission levels of the multiple packet classes for the initial set of packets, as indicated by the real-time feedback signal, cause the data communications device to detect a reorder condition. As another alternative, the device manipulates the new set of packets by discarding a packet of the new set of packets from the queue structure when the transmission levels of the multiple packet classes for the initial set of packets, as indicated by the real-time feedback signal, cause the data communications device to detect a discard condition. As yet another alternative, the data communications device manipulates the new set of packets by performing multiple functions using the real-time feedback signal. For example, the device schedules packets, reorders queues and discards packets, based on the real-time feedback signal. In this arrangement, information within the real-time feedback signal is preferably an input to an algorithm used by the device, as the device performs many complex calculations.

Preferably, each packet includes a bit pattern indicative of one of the multiple packet classes. The bit pattern resides in a predetermined location within each packet, i.e., within a type of service (TOS) field (e.g., indicating the QoS assigned to that packet). As such, to monitor transmission of the initial set of the packets and provide the real-time feedback, the traffic monitor preferably samples (monitors) packets from

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the initial set of packets. The traffic monitor recognizes, for each sampled packet, a bit pattern of that packet, and updates a set of data structures based on the recognized bit pattern of that packet, the data structures respectively corresponding to the multiple packet classes. Furthermore, the traffic monitor generates the real-time feedback signal based on the updated set of data structures such that the real-time feedback signal is indicative of the transmission levels of the multiple packet classes for the initial (or previous) set of packets.

In the TOS arrangement, the real-time feedback signal preferably indicates a bit count for each of the multiple packet classes, and a total bit count. As such, the data communications device preferably includes traffic analysis logic that provides a bit rate for each of the multiple packet classes based on the bit count for each of the multiple packet classes and the total bit count such that the new set of packets are manipulated based on the bit rate for each of the multiple packet classes.

Preferably, the data communications device can request information from the traffic monitor. In particular, the device requests the information by generating a request signal for information regarding the transmission levels of the multiple packet classes for the initial set of packets or any previous set of packets. In response, the traffic monitor generates the real-time feedback signal such that it includes the requested information.

It should be understood that network traffic patterns may shift within a relatively short period of time. As such, some conventional data communications devices may not be optimally adjusted to manage a network traffic with particular characteristics if the adjustments are infrequent or if the adjustments rely on network data gathered over extended periods of time. In contrast, the invention involves optimally adjusting how a data communications device manages packets based on a real-time feedback signal. Accordingly, if the traffic pattern shifts within a relatively short period of time, the data communications device, configured according to the invention, can adapt its operation to more optimally manage packets in a manner superior to that done in conventional data communications devices.

Additionally, the invention provides for an automated adjustment process. That is, once configured in accordance with the invention, no human intervention is required to enable the data communications device to manage packets correctly and efficiently within a network having changing network traffic characteristics. Rather, the real-time feedback signal is generated in a contiguous manner enabling the data communications device to adjust its operation dynamically and automatically.

Furthermore, unlike conventional systems which have large storage requirements to store large amounts of network data gathered over extended periods of time and large processors to analyze the network data, the invention has relatively small hardware requirements. That is, since the invention uses a real-time feedback signal that contains fresh data, there are less memory requirements and processor demands.

Also, the invention enables different types of network information to be gathered on-the-fly. That is, if the invention cannot determine how to adjust itself in view of particular network data acquired from the traffic monitor, the invention can request other types of network data to assist the invention in its determination of how to adjust itself. Accordingly, there is less likelihood that conflicting goals will result in oscillating performance. That is, the invention will tend towards a convergence or compromise between the

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different goals (e.g., QoS goals). Hence, a first action by the invention based on a particular goal may provide only a modest performance improvement, and a subsequent action based on a different goal may provide a substantially better improvement in a non-oscillating manner.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The foregoing and other objects, features and advantages of the invention will be apparent from the following more particular description of preferred embodiments of the invention, as illustrated in the accompanying drawings in which like reference characters refer to the same parts throughout the different views. The drawings are not necessarily to scale, emphasis instead being placed upon illustrating the principles of the invention.

FIG. 1 is a block diagram of a data communications device according to an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 2 is a block diagram of a traffic monitor of the data communications device of FIG. 1.

FIG. 3A is a block diagram of a network packet that is suitable for use by the data communications device of FIG. 1.

FIG. 3B is a block diagram of an alternative network packet that is suitable for use by the data communications device of FIG. 1.

FIG. 4 is a flow diagram illustrating the operation of a management module of the data communications device of FIG. 1.

FIG. 5 is a flow diagram illustrating the operation of a traffic analyzer of the data communications device of FIG. 1.

FIG. 6 is a flow diagram illustrating, by way of example, a series of operations of a management module of the data communications device of FIG. 1 in response to different types of traffic information.

FIG. 7 is a block diagram of a data communications device according to an alternative embodiment of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Overview

The invention is directed to techniques for managing network packets using a real-time feedback signal. FIG. 1 shows a data communications device 10 that connects to a network 12, and manages network packets 14 using such a real-time feedback signal in accordance with the invention. The data communications device 10 includes network packet management modules (16, 18, 20), output circuitry (22, 24) and monitoring circuitry (26). The management modules include an input scheduler 16, a reorder manager 18 and a discard manager 20. The output circuitry includes memory (or output queue) 22 and an output scheduler 24. The monitoring circuitry includes a traffic monitor 26.

When the data communications device 10 is in operation, network packets 14 flow from a portion of the network 12 to the input scheduler 16, through the memory 22, then through the output scheduler 24, and finally into a different portion of the network 12. The traffic monitor 26 preferably connects to the network 12 at an output of the data communications device 10, and observes the network packets 14 transmitted from the output scheduler 24 without interfering with the flow of network packets 14 back into the network 12.

Prior to beginning normal operation, the data communications device 10 forms a queue structure 28 in the memory

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22. The queue structure includes multiple queues 30-A, 30-B, 30-C, 30-D, . . . (collectively queues 30) which correspond to different types of service (TOS) supported by the network 12 and the data communications device 10. In one embodiment, the different types of service are different Quality of Service (QoS) classes. By way of example, the data communications device assigns queue 30-A to a best effort QoS class, queue 30-B to a general data QoS class, queue 30-C to an audio QoS class, and queue 30-D to a video QoS class.

As the input scheduler 16 receives packets 14 from the network 12, the input scheduler 16 schedules the packets 14 within the queue structure 28 of the memory 22. In particular, the input scheduler 16 identifies the TOS of each packet 14, and then places that packet 14 in the queue assigned to that TOS (e.g., one of the queues 30-A through 30-D). As a specific example, when the input scheduler 16 identifies a particular packet 14 as a video packet, the input scheduler 16 places the video packet in queue 30-D which is assigned to the video QoS class.

In addition to the input scheduler's ability to schedule packets 14, the input scheduler 16 has the capability to control the size of each queue 30 in an on-the-fly or dynamic manner based on a real-time feedback signal 38 provided by the traffic monitor 26. The input scheduler 16 analyzes network traffic data in the real-time feedback signal 38, and adjusts sizes of the queues 30 if the input scheduler 16 determines that such an adjustment would enable the data communications device 10 to improve its performance. For example, using the real-time feedback signal 38, the input scheduler 16 may determine that there is excess bandwidth available yet general data packets are being discarded by the discard manager 20 due to the small size of queue 30-B. In such a situation, the input scheduler 16 may decide to increase the size of the queue assigned to temporarily store general data packets (e.g., queue 30-B). With such an adjustment, the data communications device 10 may be able to handle transmission of all of the general data packets and without a need to discard packets.

The reorder manager 18 controls the prioritization of the queues 30 within the queue structure 28. In particular, using the real-time feedback signal 38, the reorder manager 18 attempts to order the queues 30 in a manner that enables the data communications device 10 to easily achieve certain TOS requirements. In the example, the TOS requirements are pre-established QoS goals that enable packet destinations to perceive certain responses associated with different QoS classes of packets. Accordingly, in the example, the reorder manager 18 of the data communications device 10 reorders the queues 30 to enable the data communications device 10 to achieve predetermined Quality of Service (QoS) goals based on traffic data stored within the real-time feedback signal 38.

The discard manager 20 controls deletion or discarding of packets from the queues 30. In particular, using the real-time feedback signal 38, the discard manager 20 determines when the data communications device 10 is unable to achieve its TOS goals, and discards packets in such situations in order to achieve such goals. In the example, the discard manager 20 may determine from the real-time feedback signal 38 that the data communications device 10 is not providing video packets in accordance with pre-established QoS goals. In response, the discard manager 20 may begin discarding best effort packets from the queue (e.g., queue 30-A). As a result, more bandwidth becomes available for the video packets, and the data communications device 10 is now able to achieve its QoS goals.

In one embodiment, the input scheduler 16, the reorder manager 18 and the discard manager 20 use a same instance of the real-time feedback signal 38 (e.g., instance 39) when in operation. In another embodiment, the input scheduler 16, the reorder manager 18 and the discard manager 20 use respective instances of the real-time feedback signal 38 to operate asynchronously relative to each other. The latter allows for improved flexibility and customization.

The output scheduler 24 transmits packets 14 (e.g., as a serial bit stream) from the queue structure 28 back into the network 12. Simultaneously, the traffic monitor 26 monitors the transmitted packets 14 (e.g., by identifying patterns in the serial bit stream) and generates a total count of all the packets transmitted as well as individual packet counts for each TOS. In the example, the traffic monitor 26 generates a total packet count and a count for each QoS class. In more sophisticated implementations, the traffic monitor 26 also reports packet sizes.

It should be understood that the traffic monitor 26 is ideally located at the output of the data communications device 10 to measure the output traffic provided by the data communications device 10. Accordingly, the traffic monitor 26 makes direct observations of the data communications device's operation and performance, and the traffic data within the real-time feedback signal 38 accurately reflects the device's operation and performance. Such an arrangement is superior to conventional arrangements that monitor network traffic at the input of a data communications device since monitoring the traffic at the input provides no indication of how successfully the device handles the traffic.

For example, suppose packets of a particular QoS class begin to accumulate in a data communications device queue. If the queue begins to overflow, a conventional data communications device may handle the situation by discarding packets to alleviate the congestion. However, with the invention, the traffic monitor 26 observing the output of the data communications device 10 may determine that other QoS classes are overutilizing the output scheduler 24 thus preventing the particular QoS class of packets from being transmitted. In this situation, the data communications device 10 may then temporarily reprioritize the overflowing queue to a higher priority to provide the overflowing packets greater bandwidth to transmit in order to alleviate the congestion problem. Such reprioritization is a more efficient and effective solution which is overlooked by conventional devices. Further details of various portions of the data communications device 10 will now be provided.

Traffic Monitor

As shown in FIG. 2, the traffic monitor 26 includes a pattern recognizer 42, a controller 44, multiple individual counters 46-1, 46-2, . . . , 46-N (collectively counters 46), and an aggregate counter 48. Before the data communications device 10 begins normal operation, the traffic monitor 26 assigns one of the individual counters 46 to each TOS. Then, during normal operation, the traffic monitor 26 observes packets 14 as they are transmitted from the output scheduler 24, and updates the counters 46, 48 such that they indicate the observed network traffic leaving the data communications device 10. In one embodiment, the packets 14 are transmitted from the output scheduler 24 as a serial bit stream, and the pattern recognizer 42 identifies patterns within the serial bit stream to detect packets and to determine the TOS of each detected packet.

In the above QoS example, prior to normal operation, the traffic monitor 26 assigns an individual counter 46 to each QoS class (e.g., video, audio, general data, and best effort). Then, during normal operation, the pattern recognizer 42

scans a class indicator field (i.e., the TOS field) of each packet 14 to determine the QoS of that packet 14. The controller 44 then updates the appropriate counter 46 (i.e., the counter 46 corresponding to that QoS) and the aggregate counter 48. By way of example, for a video packet 14, the controller 44 increments a corresponding one of the counters 46 and the aggregate counter 48.

FIG. 3A shows a format 50 for a network packet 14 that is suitable for use by the invention. The network packet format 50 includes a data portion 52 and a header portion 54. The header portion 54 includes a class indicator field 56 (e.g., bit positions 8-11) that indicates the TOS (e.g., the QoS class for that packet). By way of example only, a class indicator of x0011 indicates video QoS, a class indicator of x001 indicates audio QoS, a class indicator of x001 indicates general data QoS, and a class indicator of x0000 indicates best effort QoS.

FIG. 3B shows an alternative format 58 for a network packet 14 that is suitable for use by the invention. The network packet format 58 is similar to the network packet format 50 except that a data portion 60 of the network packet format 58, rather than a header portion 62, stores a class indicator 64. Accordingly, the class associated with a network packet may be determined by an analysis of the actual data carried by that packet.

As the pattern recognizer 42 monitors network traffic on the output of the data communications device 10 and the controller 44 updates the counters 46, 48, the controller 44 simultaneously generates the real-time feedback signal 38 and sends the signal 38 to the network packet management modules. In one embodiment, the controller 44 generates and sends the real-time feedback signal 38, as a digital signal, automatically (e.g., every 1 ms) to enable the network packet management modules (16, 18, 20) to dynamically adjust the manner in which they manage packets within the data communications device 10 (e.g., instance 39 in FIG. 1). Alternatively, the controller 44 sends the real-time feedback signal 38 to the management modules on a single line as a time multiplexed analog signal, or on multiple lines as individual analog signals.

Preferably, the traffic data contained within the real-time feedback signal 38 is a copy of the contents of the counters 46, 48. Accordingly, large amounts of storage space and processor resources for extensive post-processing are not required. Rather, any complexity involved in analyzing the traffic data (i.e., the counter contents) can be moved to the network packet management modules (the input scheduler 16, the reorder manager 18 and the discard manager 20).

Referring back to FIG. 1, the traffic analyzer 32-IS includes a control module 34-IS and memory 36-IS, and operates such circuitry to analyze basic traffic data stored within the real-time feedback signal 38. In one embodiment, the real-time feedback signal 38 is a digital signal that simply includes the contents of each counter 46 and 48 (see FIG. 2). For this embodiment, the traffic analyzer 32-IS keeps a clock to determine the change in time between receiving each set of counter contents. The traffic analyzer 32-IS determines the total bit rate for the most recent set of transmitted packets from the most recent set of counter contents, the previous set of counter contents and the delta time as follows:

$$\text{Overall Bit Rate} = \frac{\text{most recent total bit count} - \text{previous total bit count}}{\text{time between most recent and previous total bit counts}}$$

Similarly, the bit rate for any particular packet class can be determined as follows:

$$\text{Bit Rate For Particular Packet Class} = \frac{\text{most recent class bit count} - \text{previous class bit count}}{\text{time between most recent and previous class bit counts}}$$

Additionally, the percentage of bandwidth can be calculated for each packet class. Below is a calculation for the percentage of video packets:

$$\text{percentage of video data packets} = \frac{\text{number of video data packets counted}}{\text{number of total packets counted}}$$

Since traffic data analysis is preferably performed within the traffic analyzers 32, the traffic monitor 26 can be kept simple. Accordingly, less processor and memory resources are required for the traffic monitor 26 relative to conventional traffic monitoring devices that store large amounts of traffic data over extended periods of time (e.g., hours or even days) and which then must post-process the large amounts of traffic data.

Nevertheless, more sophisticated monitoring devices are also suitable for the traffic monitor 26. For example, in one embodiment, the traffic monitor 26 counts bits rather than packets 14 in order to provide finer granularity of data. In this embodiment, over specified time intervals, each counter 46 counts bits for a corresponding TOS class of traffic (e.g., for a particular QoS class) and the aggregate counter 48 counts the total number of bits for all TOS classes. The transmission speed (i.e., the speed of the media) is used as a clock. The number of bits counted for each traffic class is then divided by the media speed multiplied by the time interval to determine the media utilization and rate information of each TOS class. This embodiment provides finer resolution than the earlier described packet counting embodiment.

An example of a device that is capable of operating in this manner and that is suitable for the traffic monitor 26 is the Event Driven Interface (EDI) manufactured by International Business Machines of Armonk, New York. The EDI performs pattern recognition based upon a program defined by control vectors. In particular, the EDI receives a serial bit stream (provided by the output scheduler 24), and performs logical pattern recognition to produce signals as an output in response to the identification of specific, predefined patterns in the serial bit stream.

Some details of the EDI and similar traffic monitoring techniques are described in U.S. Pat. No. 5,365,514 (Hershey, et al.), entitled "Event driven interface for a system for monitoring and controlling a data communications network," the teachings of which are incorporated by reference herein in their entirety. Other similar traffic monitoring techniques are described in U.S. Pat. No. 5,375,070 (Hershey, et al.), entitled "Information collection architecture and method for a data communications network," the teachings of which are incorporated by reference herein in their entirety. Additionally, similar traffic monitoring techniques are described in U.S. Pat. No. 5,493,689 (Waclawsky, et al.), entitled "System for configuring an event driven interface including control blocks defining good loop locations in a memory which represent detection of a characteristic pattern," the teachings of which are incorporated by reference herein in their entirety. Furthermore, similar traffic monitoring techniques are described in U.S. Pat. No. 5,586,266 (Hershey, et al.), entitled "System and method for

adaptive, active monitoring of a serial data stream having a characteristic pattern," the teachings of which are incorporated by reference herein in their entirety. Still further, similar traffic monitoring techniques are described in U.S. Pat. No. 5,615,135 (Waclawsky, et al.), entitled "Event driven interface having a dynamically reconfigurable counter for monitoring a high speed data network according to changing traffic events," the teachings of which are incorporated by reference herein in their entirety.

In one embodiment, the invention uses the flexibility and sophistication of the EDI and similar traffic monitors to enable the real-time feedback signal 38 to include customized data. To take advantage of such features, the traffic analyzers 32 of the management modules (e.g., the traffic analyzer 32-DM of the discard manager 20) are equipped to send a request signal 40 to the traffic analyzer 26 requesting customized data.

Such a feature provides the invention with the ability to better determine the proper course of operation to improve throughput and the data communication device's ability to meet or exceed its QoS goals. Furthermore, the QoS goals may occasionally conflict giving rise to the potential for oscillating operation, i.e., the data communication device operating at one extreme to achieve one goal and then a different extreme to achieve a different goal, and so forth. Such operation is typically undesirable since substantial overhead is needed to shift between operating extremes. To prevent such operation from occurring, the management modules's abilities to request custom traffic data enable the data communications device 10 to achieve convergence of goals, namely a compromise that results in stable yet optimal non-oscillating operation.

Management Modules

Each of the network packet management modules (the input scheduler 16, the reorder manager 18 and the discard manager 20) has a set of module specific TOS goals (e.g., QoS goals), and uses the real-time feedback signal 38 to attain those goals. In particular, when the data communications device 10 is in normal operation, each management module 16, 18, 20 performs a procedure 70 to attain its specific TOS goals, as will now be explained in further detail with reference to FIG. 4.

In step 72, the management module initializes a set of control parameters according to a control algorithm. The control parameters are specific to the particular management module and selected to enable the module to attain a set of particular TOS goals.

In step 74, the management module performs its module function based on the control parameters. The module function is specific to the particular management module as well.

In step 76, the management module checks whether it should continue to operate with real-time adjustments. For example, if the data communications device 10 determines that it should shutdown, the management module terminates or ends the procedure 70. Otherwise, the management module proceeds to step 78.

In step 78, the management module obtains real-time feedback results based on the real-time feedback signal 38 provided by the traffic monitor 26. In particular, the traffic analyzer 32 of the management module analyzes the traffic data contained within the real-time feedback signal 38 to generate the real-time feedback results. Preferably, the management module generates customized results from the traffic data within the real-time feedback signal 38 by performing module-specific calculations using the more general network data contained within the real-time feed-

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back signal 38. In the alternative, if the traffic monitor 26 has enough sophistication to provide the customized results directly, the management module sends requests for the results, and the real-time feedback signal is generated in response to such requests.

In step 80, the management module determines whether an adjustment to its operation is needed. For example, the management module may compare the generated network traffic results to a set of particular TOS goals to determine whether the management module is achieving these TOS goals. If no adjustment is needed (e.g., if the QoS goals are achieved), step 80 proceeds back to step 74. If an adjustment is needed (e.g., if the QoS goals are not achieved), step 80 proceeds to step 82.

In step 82, the management module adjusts the control parameters (initialized in step 72) according to the one or more algorithms based on the real-time feedback results. Such adjustments typically improve the data communications device's ability to attain the particular TOS goals for the management module. Then, step 82 proceeds back to step 74.

When the data communications device 10 is in normal operation, the management module may perform several iterations of the steps of procedure 70. Through each iteration, the management module ensures that the data communications device 10 operates in such a manner that the TOS goals are likely to be achieved. As the characteristics of the outputted network traffic change (i.e., the packets 14 transmitted from the output scheduler 24), the data communications device 10 dynamically alters its operation to accommodate such changes.

A further explanation will now be provided for each of the different network packet management modules 16, 18, 20 beginning with the input scheduler 16. In particular, separate examples are provided of each management module 16, 18, 20 in the context of a data communications device 10 that supports a variety of QoS classes (e.g., video, audio, general data and best effort).

Input Scheduler Example

In step 72, the input scheduler 16 initializes a set of control parameters controlling the manner in which packets are placed within the queue structure 28. In particular, the set of control parameters assigns a particular packet class to each queue 30 and controls the size of each queue 30. By way of example, packets 14 of the best effort class are assigned to queue 30-A of the queue structure 28. General data packets are assigned to queue 30-B. Audio packets are assigned to queue 30-C. Video packets are assigned to queue 30-D. The queue sizes can be set such that the queue structure 28 can store an equal number of best effort, general data, audio and video packets.

In step 74, the input scheduler 16 performs its function of scheduling packets 14 within the queue structure 28. For example, as network packets 14 arrive at the data communications device 10, the input scheduler 16 stores all packets of the best effort class in queue 30-A, all packets of the general data class in queue 30-B, and so on.

In step 76, the input scheduler 16 determines whether it should continue scheduling network packets 14. For example, a shutdown signal received by the data communications device 10 may cause the input scheduler 16 to terminate its packet scheduling operation.

In step 78, the input scheduler 16 receives customized real-time feedback results that are based on traffic data accumulated by the traffic monitor 26. In particular, the traffic analyzer 32-IS (i.e., the controller 34-IS in conjunction with the memory 36-IS) operates on general traffic data

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provided in the real-time feedback signal 38 to generate customized results for the input scheduler 16. Alternatively, the input scheduler 16 sends a request signal 40 to the traffic monitor 26 to request traffic data in a customized form, and the traffic monitor 26 responds with the customized results stored within the real-time feedback signal 38.

In step 80, the input scheduler 16 determines whether to continue with the present queue assignments and the present queue sizes depending upon whether particular QoS goals for the input scheduler 16 have been achieved. For example, the input scheduler 16 may have a QoS goal of providing 25% of the output scheduler's bandwidth to general data packets. If the real-time feedback results indicate that the data communications device 10 has achieved the QoS goals, the input scheduler 16 proceeds back to step 74. Otherwise, the input scheduler 16 proceeds to step 82.

In step 82, the input scheduler 16 adjusts the control parameters according to one or more algorithms and real-time feedback results in an attempt to achieve the QoS goals. For example, suppose the input scheduler 16 fails to achieve the goal of providing 25% of the output scheduler's bandwidth to general data packets even though the queue assigned to general data packets is generally full and the other queues are generally empty. In such a situation, the input scheduler 16 runs an algorithm on this traffic data and determines that the failure may be due to the discarding of general data packets due to congestion at the output scheduler 24 (resulting from high network traffic in the network 12). Accordingly, the algorithm of the input scheduler 16 may direct the input scheduler 16 to increase the queue size of the queue responsible for temporarily storing general data packets (e.g., queue 30-B) since buffering the general data packets, in contrast to discarding general data packets, increases the likelihood that the packets will be transmitted successfully.

The input scheduler 16 then returns to step 74, and schedules newly arriving packets 14 in the queue structure 28 based on the adjusted control parameters. Over time, the procedure 70 may loop through steps 74-82 several times such that the input scheduler 16 changes its operation dynamically over time in response to variations in the network traffic passing through the data communications device 10. For example, suppose that the network congestion clears a few minutes later. At that time, the input scheduler 16 may determine that the larger queue size is no longer necessary and reclaim some space in the memory 22. In one embodiment, the input scheduler 16 determines whether a control parameter adjustment should be made (step 80) approximately every minute (60 seconds).

Since such changes occur in an automated manner in response to the real-time feedback signal 38, rather than in response to human intervention (such as by a network administrator) over extended and perhaps protracted periods of time, the input scheduler 16 provides for superior network packet scheduling. In particular, the input scheduler 16 is capable of adapting and adjusting its operation to short and perhaps subtle changes in network traffic in time frames that are orders of magnitude shorter than conventional techniques requiring either human intervention or techniques that focus only on traffic arrival patterns from the network. Such changes would go unnoticed by conventional techniques that collect traffic data over extended time periods.

Reorder Manager Example

A further explanation of the operation of the reorder manager 18 in the context of QoS classes will now be provided with reference to FIG. 4. In step 72, the reorder manager 18 initializes a set of control parameters which

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control the order of the queues 30 within the queue structure 28. As such, the control parameters effectively control the priority of QoS classes handled by the data communications device 10. By way of example, network packets of the best effort class initially are given the lowest priority and assigned to queue 30-A of the queue structure 28. General data packets initially are given the a higher priority and assigned to queue 30-B. Audio packets initially are given a higher priority and assigned to queue 30-C. Video packets initially are given the highest priority and assigned to queue 30-D.

In step 74, the reorder manager 18 orders the queues 30 within the queue structure 28 based on the control parameters initialized in step 72. For example, the reorder manager 18 orders queue 30-D first to give the video QoS class the highest priority, followed by queue 30-C for the audio QoS class, queue 30-B for the general data QoS class, and queue 30-A for the best effort QoS class.

In step 76, the reorder manager 18 determines whether it should continue to order the queues 30. A shutdown signal received by the data communications device 10 would cause the reorder manager 18 to terminate its queue ordering operation. Otherwise, the reorder manager 18 proceeds to step 78.

In step 78, the reorder manager 18 receives customized real-time feedback results that are based on traffic data monitored by the traffic monitor 26. In particular, the traffic analyzer 32-RM (i.e., the controller 34-RM in conjunction with the memory 36-RM) operates on general traffic data provided in the real-time feedback signal 38 to generate customized results for the reorder manager 18. Alternatively, the reorder manager 18 sends a request signal 40 to the traffic monitor 26 to request traffic data in a customized form, and the traffic monitor 26 responds with the customized results stored within the real-time feedback signal 38.

In step 80, the reorder manager 18 determines whether particular QoS goals for the reorder manager 18 have been achieved. For example, the reorder manager 18 may have a QoS goal of providing 25% of the output scheduler's bandwidth to general data packets. If the real-time feedback results indicate that the reorder manager 18 meets this goal, the reorder manager 18 proceeds to step 74. Otherwise, the reorder manager 18 proceeds to step 82.

In step 82, the reorder manager 18 adjusts its control parameters according to one or more algorithms and the real-time feedback results. For example, the reorder manager 18 may use an anti-starvation algorithm to promote any QoS classes that are prevented from transmitting due to other QoS classes overutilizing the output scheduler 24. In this situation, the anti-starvation algorithm may reprioritize the queues 30, at least temporarily, to allow packets of the non-transmitting QoS class (i.e., the starved class) to transmit.

As another example, in step 82, if the real-time feedback results indicate that 20% of the output scheduler's bandwidth is general data packets and a reorder manager algorithm indicates that 25% bandwidth for general data packets can be achieved by re-prioritizing the list of traffic classes such that, at least temporarily, general data is given a higher priority than audio packets, the reorder manager 18 adjusts the control parameters accordingly. That is, the reorder manager 18 swaps the priority of the general data QoS queue (queue 30-B) and the audio QoS queue (queue 30-C) on its prioritization list such that the general data QoS queue is given higher priority. Similarly, if the real-time feedback results indicate that only 5% of the output scheduler's bandwidth is general data packets, the reorder manager

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algorithm may instruct the reorder manager 18 to take more drastic measures such as giving the audio QoS queue (queue 30-C) a higher priority than the video QoS queue (queue 30-D).

The reorder manager 18 then returns to step 74, and schedules newly arriving packets 14 in the queue structure 28 based on the adjusted control parameters. Over time, the procedure 70 may loop through steps 74-82 several times such that the reorder manager 18 changes its operation dynamically over time in response to variations in the network traffic passing through the data communications device 10. In one embodiment, the reorder manager 18 determines whether a control parameter adjustment should be made (step 80) approximately every 5 to 10 seconds. Since such changes occur in response to a real-time feedback signal rather than in response to human intervention (such as by a network administrator) over extended and perhaps protracted periods of time, the reorder manager 18 provides superior reordering. In particular, the reorder manager 18 is capable of adapting and adjusting its operation to short and perhaps subtle changes in network traffic in time frames that are orders of magnitude shorter than conventional techniques requiring human intervention or rely on traffic arrival patterns into the data communications device from the network.

Discard Manager Example

A further explanation of the operation of the discard manager 20 will now be provided with reference to FIG. 4. In step 72, the discard manager 20 initializes a set of control parameters that control the discarding of network packets 14 from the queue structure 28. By way of example, the control parameters direct the discard manager 20 to discard all best effort packets before discarding all other packets. Additionally, the control parameters direct the discard manager 20 to discard general data packets prior to discarding audio packets, and then to discard audio packets prior to discarding video packets.

In step 74, the discard manager 20 discards packets from one or more of the queues 30 if any of the queues 30 become filled. For example, suppose that the best effort QoS queue (e.g., queue 30-A) becomes filled. In response, the discard manager 20 discards packets from the best effort queue (queue 30-A).

In step 76, the discard manager 20 determines whether it should continue to operate. For example, a shutdown signal received by the data communications device 10 would cause the discard manager 20 to terminate its queue ordering operation. Otherwise, the discard manager 20 proceeds to step 78.

In step 78, the discard manager 20 receives customized real-time feedback results that are based on traffic monitored by the traffic monitor 26. In particular, the traffic analyzer 32-DM (i.e., the controller 34-DM in conjunction with the memory 36-DM) operates on general traffic data provided in the real-time feedback signal 38 to generate customized results for the discard manager 20. Alternatively, the discard manager 20 sends a request signal 40 to the traffic monitor 26 to request traffic data in a customized form, and the traffic monitor 26 responds with the customized results stored within the real-time feedback signal 38.

In step 80, the discard manager 20 determines whether particular QoS goals for the discard manager 20 have been achieved. For example, the discard manager 20 may have a QoS goal of providing 30% of the output scheduler's bandwidth to video data packets. If the real-time feedback results indicate that the discard manager 20 meets this goal, the discard manager 20 proceeds to step 74. Otherwise, the discard manager 20 proceeds to step 82.

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In step 82, the discard manager 18 adjusts its set of control parameters according to a discard algorithm and the real-time feedback results in signal 38 (see FIG. 1). For example, if the real-time feedback results indicate that only 25% of the output scheduler's bandwidth is video data packets, 5% short of the QoS goal of 30% for video packet bandwidth, the discard manager 20 adjusts the control parameters such that some non-video packets are discarded to make more bandwidth available to video packets. By way of example, suppose that the discard algorithm determines that the discard manager 20 should discard packets from the queue assigned to receive best effort packets (queue 30-A) in an attempt to raise the video packet bandwidth above 30%. Accordingly, the discard manager 20 adjusts the control parameters to allow discarding of best effort packets from the queue structure 28. Step 82 then proceeds back to step 74.

In step 74, the discard manager 20 discards best effort packets from the queue structure 28. The effect of such discarding will be sensed by the traffic monitor 26 and cause a change in the traffic data within the real-time feedback signal 38 which is sent to the discard manager 20. Accordingly, a feedback loop is formed that enables the discard manager 20 to dynamically control discarding of packets using the real-time feedback signal 38. In one embodiment, the discard manager 20 determines whether a control parameter adjustment should be made (step 80) approximately every second. No human intervention is required.

Traffic Analyzer

FIG. 5 shows a procedure 90 performed by each of the traffic analyzers 32-IS, 32-RM, and 32-DM demonstrating that traffic analyzer's ability to generate different types of performance measures (e.g., rate data) and optimality data based on the traffic data stored within the real-time feedback signal 38. In step 92, the traffic analyzer 32 receives traffic data within the real-time feedback signal 38. In step 94, the traffic analyzer 32 generates rate data based on the traffic data (e.g., rate data). In step 96, the traffic analyzer 32 provides the rate data to the management module (e.g., the discard manager 20).

Subsequent performance of procedure 90 by the same traffic analyzer 32 may generate a different type of performance measure or optimality data (e.g., step 94-B rather than step 94-A). Accordingly, different types of data can be provided to the management modules 16, 18, 20 for use in managing network packets 14.

As a result, any management module of the data communications device 10 may operate based on a variety of data and algorithms for scheduling, reordering and discarding. FIG. 6 shows a procedure 100 including such operation of the data communications device 10. In step 102-1, a particular management module 16, 18, 20 of the data communications device 10 performs a module function based on a first type of data (e.g., the discard manager 20 discards packets 14 based on rate data). In step 102-2, that management module performs a module function based on a second type of data that is different than the first type of data (e.g., the discard manager 20 discards packets 14 based on overall throughput). In step 102-N, the management module performs a module function based on another type of data (e.g., the discard manager 20 discards packets 14 based on percentage bandwidth or the number of contiguous packets of a particular type seen by the traffic monitor 26). Accordingly, the management modules 16, 18, 20 of the data communications device 10 have the flexibility and dynamic operation to optimally manage packets.

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FIG. 7 shows a different embodiment of the invention device than that shown in FIG. 1. In particular, FIG. 7 shows a data communications device 110 that includes a central traffic analyzer 122 for analyzing traffic data stored within the real-time feedback signal 38. The central traffic analyzer 122 includes a control module 124 and memory 126. The central traffic analyzer 122 operates to provide traffic data in a manner similar to the traffic analyzers 32 of FIG. 1. However, the centralization of the traffic analyzer 122 provides a benefit of reducing hardware since the centralized circuitry can be shared (e.g., in a multiplexed manner) between the various management modules.

For either the data communications device 10 (see FIG. 1) or the data communications device 110 (FIG. 7), a real-time feedback signal, containing an immediate and up-to-date analysis of network traffic data, is used to enable the device 10, 110 to make dynamic adjustments. Accordingly, such adjustments are based on current traffic conditions rather than out-dated conditions. This allows the invention devices to make adjustments that are superior to conventional adjustment techniques that use traffic data collected over extended periods of time such as hours or even days. Furthermore, no human intervention is required to make the adjustments for the invention devices. That is, such adjustments are made in an automatic and routine manner alleviating the need for human intervention.

EQUIVALENTS

While this invention has been particularly shown and described with references to preferred embodiments thereof, it will be understood by those skilled in the art that various changes in form and details may be made therein without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention as defined by the appended claims.

For example, it should be understood that the above-discussed invention data communications devices can be any type of network related device that receives and transmits data packets. In particular, the data communications devices 10, 110 can be routers, bridges, switches, access servers, gateways, hubs, proxy servers, repeaters, and so forth which exchange data over an interconnection of data links. The data links may be physical cables (e.g., electrical or fiber optic connections) or wireless communication mechanisms (e.g., cellular telephony equipment). Such data communications devices can be general purpose computers such as personal computers, workstations, minicomputers, mainframes and the like running specialized network software, or specialized hardware such as cellular base stations, web-site kiosks, facsimile or e-mail servers, video servers, and so forth.

In the context of devices with multiple inputs or outputs, it should be understood that the elements shown in FIGS. 1 and 7 apply to individual outputs of such devices. For example, for a router with multiple inputs and outputs, the elements of FIG. 1 illustrate the portions of the router that operate for a particular output of the router. Other outputs of the router would have similar elements or may share a centralized component.

Additionally, the data communications devices of the invention can be used with various network protocols and with various network types. In particular, networks environments having data rates such as fractional T1, T1, E1 or higher or lower, are suitable for the invention.

Furthermore, various media are suitable for carrying the real-time feedback signal 38 (see FIGS. 1 and 7). The signal 38 may be digital, analog, modulated (AM or FM) or spread

spectrum wireless (e.g., CDMA). Additionally, the media can be electrical, optical or wireless.

Moreover, the traffic analyzer 32, 122 and/or the traffic monitor 26 may be external to the data communications device 10, 110. That is, a conventional data communications device and a conventional traffic monitor can be adapted such that the traffic monitor provides a real-time feedback signal rather than simple data for storage and post-processing. Similarly, a conventional data communications device can be adapted to receive real-time results as input. The traffic analyzer then analyzes the traffic data contained within the real-time signal and generates real-time results that enable the data communications device to make dynamic adjustments. Accordingly, human intervention is not required to make adjustments, and such adjustments are made automatically in a timelier manner.

Additionally, it should be understood that the data communications device may include other management modules (e.g., other modules in addition to the input scheduler 16, the reorder manager 18 and the discard manager 20), and that such modules may operate according to one or more algorithms using the real-time feedback results derived from the real-time feedback signal as an input. Accordingly, adjustments to the operation of the modules are based, at least partially, on the real-time feedback signal.

It should be understood that it is unnecessary for each management module to operate according to the real-time feedback signal. Rather, at least one management module operates according to the real-time feedback signal. Some or all of the management modules may use conventional algorithms to determine operation. However, at least one of the management modules uses an algorithm that takes the generated real-time feedback data as an input. To reduce the complexity of having to create new algorithms, conventional algorithms can be used where a normally non-real-time input is replaced with the real-time feedback results.

Furthermore, it should be understood that the real-time feedback signal 38 is preferably sent automatically from the traffic monitor 26. In this situation, there is no need for the traffic monitor 26 to receive a request signal 40.

As an alternative, if the traffic monitor 26 is a sophisticated device capable of providing customized results, the traffic monitor 26 waits for the request signal 40 to identify a particular type customized result and then sends the real-time feedback signal 38 in response to the request 40. In this situation, the requests 40 are regular in nature such that the real-time feedback signal 38 is provided routinely enabling the data communications device to maintain packet management under dynamic control.

Furthermore, it should be understood that the procedure 70 (see FIG. 4) can be modified such that the control parameters of the management module are adjusted regardless of whether the data communications device presently achieves its TOS requirements (e.g., QoS goals). Accordingly, performance improvements are attempted continuously.

Additionally, it should be understood that classes other than QoS classes are suitable TOS for the invention. For example, dedicated TOS classes can be established for particular events such as a scheduled point-to-point audio/video conference or a scheduled pay-per-view event. In such situations, data communication devices along a path of the network 12 operate to provide a customized TOS between the source and destination for each event.

Furthermore, it should be understood that the operations of the input scheduler 16, the reorder manager 18, the

discard manager 20, and perhaps other modules using the real-time feedback signal 38, can be based on a variety of metrics. In one embodiment, the real-time feedback signal 38 indicates, and these modules use, as metrics, at least one of a maximum packet size for each of the multiple packet classes, a minimum packet size for each of the multiple packet classes, a mean packet size for each of the multiple packet classes, a maximum packet size for all of the multiple packet classes, a minimum packet size for all of the multiple packet classes, a mean packet size for all of the multiple packet classes, a maximum number of contiguous bits for each of the multiple packet classes, a minimum number of contiguous bits for each of the multiple packet classes, a mean number of contiguous bits for each of the multiple packet classes, a maximum number of contiguous bits for all of the multiple packet classes, a minimum number of contiguous bits for all of the multiple packet classes, and a mean number of contiguous bits for all of the multiple packet classes. Other similar traffic-related metrics can be used as well, and are intended to be within the scope of the invention.

What is claimed is:

1. A method for managing packets in a data communications device having a memory, the method comprising the steps of:

transmitting an initial set of packets from the data communications device;

monitoring transmission of the initial set of the packets from the data communications device, and providing a real-time feedback signal indicating transmission information regarding the initial set of packets;

manipulating a new set of packets within the memory of the data communications device based on the real-time feedback signal; and

transmitting the new set of packets from the data communications device based on how the new set of packets was manipulated within the memory of the data communications device.

2. The method of claim 1 wherein each packet belongs to one of multiple packet classes, and wherein the step of monitoring and providing includes the step of:

generating the real-time feedback signal to indicate transmission levels of the multiple packet classes for the initial set of packets.

3. The method of claim 2 wherein the memory of the data communications device stores a queue structure, and wherein the step of manipulating includes the step of:

scheduling a packet of the new set of packets in the queue structure based on the transmission levels of the multiple packet classes for the initial set of packets, as indicated by the real-time feedback signal.

4. The method of claim 2 wherein the memory of the data communications device stores a queue structure, and wherein the step of manipulating includes the step of:

reordering queues within the queue structure when the transmission levels of the multiple packet classes for the initial set of packets, as indicated by the real-time feedback signal, cause the data communications device to detect a reorder condition.

5. The method of claim 2 wherein the memory of the data communications device stores a queue structure, and wherein the step of manipulating includes the step of:

discarding a packet of the new set of packets from the queue structure when the transmission levels of the multiple packet classes for the initial set of packets, as indicated by the real-time feedback signal, cause the data communications device to detect a discard condition.

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6. The method of claim 2 wherein the memory of the data communications device stores a queue structure, and wherein the step of manipulating includes the steps of:

scheduling each of the new set of packets in the queue structure based on the transmission levels of the multiple packet classes for the initial set of packets, as indicated by the real-time feedback signal;

reordering queues of the queue structure when the transmission levels of the multiple packet classes for the initial set of packets, as indicated by the real-time feedback signal, cause the data communications device to detect a reorder condition; and

discarding a packet of the new set of packets from the queue structure when the transmission levels of the multiple packet classes for the initial set of packets, as indicated by the real-time feedback signal, cause the data communications device to detect a discard condition.

7. The method of claim 2 wherein each packet includes a bit pattern indicative of one of the multiple packet classes, and wherein the step of monitoring and providing includes the step of:

sampling packets from the initial set of packets;

recognizing, for each sampled packet, a bit pattern of that packet, and updating a set of data structures based on the recognized bit pattern of that packet, the data structures respectively corresponding to the multiple packet classes; and

generating the real-time feedback signal based on the updated set of data structures such that the real-time feedback signal is indicative of the transmission levels of the multiple packet classes for the initial set of packets.

8. The method of claim 7 wherein the real-time feedback signal indicates a bit count for each of the multiple packet classes, and a total bit count; and wherein the method further comprises the step of:

providing a bit rate for each of the multiple packet classes based on the bit count for each of the multiple packet classes and the total bit count such that the new set of packets are manipulated based on the bit rate for each of the multiple packet classes.

9. The method of claim 2, further comprising the step of: generating, prior to the step of monitoring and providing, a request signal for information regarding the transmission levels of the multiple packet classes for the initial set of packets.

10. The method of claim 9 wherein the step of monitoring and providing includes the step of:

generating the real-time feedback signal in response to the request signal.

11. A data communications device, comprising:

a storage and transmission circuit that stores and transmits packets;

a traffic monitor, coupled to the storage and transmission circuit, that monitors packet transmissions from the storage and transmission circuit, and generates a real-time feedback signal indicating packet transmission information; and

a control circuit, coupled to the storage and transmission circuit and the traffic monitor, that manipulates packets within the storage and transmission circuit based on the real-time feedback signal, the storage and transmission circuit transmitting packets based on how the packets are manipulated by the control circuit.

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12. The data communications device of claim 11 wherein each packet belongs to one of multiple packet classes, and wherein the traffic monitor includes:

a controller that generates the real-time feedback signal to indicate transmission levels of the multiple packet classes for packets transmitted from the storage and transmission circuit.

13. The data communications device of claim 12 wherein the storage and transmission circuit includes a memory that stores a queue structure, and wherein the control circuit includes:

an input scheduler having a first input that receives packets, a second input that receives the real-time feedback signal, and an output that schedules the received packets in the queue structure based on the transmission levels of the multiple packet classes, as indicated by the real-time feedback signal.

14. The data communications device of claim 12 wherein the storage and transmission circuit includes a memory that stores a queue structure, and wherein the control circuit includes:

a reorder manager having an input that receives the real-time feedback signal, and an output that reorders queues within the queue structure when the transmission levels of the multiple packet classes, as indicated by the real-time feedback signal, cause the reorder manager to detect a reorder condition.

15. The data communications device of claim 12 wherein the storage and transmission circuit includes a memory that stores a queue structure, and wherein the control circuit includes:

a discard manager having an input that receives the real-time feedback signal, and an output that discards a packet from the queue structure when the transmission levels of the multiple packet classes, as indicated by the real-time feedback signal, cause the discard manager to detect a discard condition.

16. The data communications device of claim 12 wherein the storage and transmission circuit includes a memory that stores a queue structure, and wherein the control circuit includes:

an input scheduler having a first input that receives packets, a second input that receives the real-time feedback signal, and an output that schedules the received packets in the queue structure based on the transmission levels of the multiple packet classes, as indicated by the real-time feedback signal;

a reorder manager having an input that receives the real-time feedback signal, and an output that reorders queues of the queue structure when the transmission levels of the multiple packet classes, as indicated by the real-time feedback signal, cause the reorder manager to detect a reorder condition; and

a discard manager having an input that receives the real-time feedback signal, and an output that discards a packet from the queue structure when the transmission levels of the multiple packet classes, as indicated by the real-time feedback signal, cause the discard manager to detect a discard condition.

17. The data communications device of claim 16 wherein the input scheduler, the reorder manager and the discard manager use respective instances of the real-time feedback signal to operate asynchronously relative to each other.

18. The data communications device of claim 16 wherein the input scheduler, the reorder manager and the discard manager use a same instance of the real-time feedback signal when in operation.

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19. The data communications device of claim 12 wherein each packet includes a bit pattern indicative of one of the multiple packet classes, and wherein the traffic monitor includes:

- a pattern recognizer that (i) samples packets transmitted from the storage and transmission circuit, and (ii) recognizes, for each sampled packet, a bit pattern of that packet; and
- a controller, coupled to the pattern recognizer, that (i) updates, for each sampled packet, a set of data structures based on the recognized bit pattern of that packet, the data structures respectively corresponding to the multiple packet classes, and (ii) generates the real-time feedback signal based on the updated set of data structures such that the real-time feedback signal is indicative of the transmission levels of the multiple packet classes.

20. The data communications device of claim 19 wherein the real-time feedback signal indicates a bit count for each of the multiple packet classes, and a total bit count; and wherein the control circuit includes:

- a traffic analyzer that receives the real-time feedback signal and provides a bit rate for each of the multiple packet classes based on the bit count for each of the multiple packet classes and the total bit count such that packets are manipulated within the storage and transmission circuit based on the bit rate for each of the multiple packet classes.

21. The data communications device of claim 12 wherein the real-time feedback signal indicates, as metrics, at least one of a maximum packet size for each of the multiple packet classes, a minimum packet size for each of the multiple packet classes, a mean packet size for each of the multiple packet classes, a maximum packet size for all of the multiple packet classes, a minimum packet size for all of the multiple packet classes, a mean packet size for all of the multiple packet classes, a maximum number of contiguous

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bits for each of the multiple packet classes, a minimum number of contiguous bits for each of the multiple packet classes, a mean number of contiguous bits for each of the multiple packet classes, a maximum number of contiguous bits for all of the multiple packet classes, a minimum number of contiguous bits for all of the multiple packet classes, and a mean number of contiguous bits for all of the multiple packet classes.

22. The data communications device of claim 12 wherein the control circuit includes:

- a control module that generates a request signal for information regarding the transmission levels of the multiple packet classes.

23. The data communications device of claim 22 wherein the traffic monitor includes:

- a controller having an input that receives the request signal, and an output that provides the real-time feedback signal in response to the request signal.

24. The method of claim 1 wherein the step of providing a real-time feedback signal further includes the step of generating customized data to send as said feedback signal.

25. The method of claim 24 wherein said data communications device has a plurality of management functions and said step of generating customized data includes the step of generating data customized to a particular management function.

26. The method of claim 24 wherein said step of generating customized data further includes generating data customized to achieve a type of service goal.

27. The data communications device of claim 11 further comprising a plurality of management modules, each said management module having a particular data management function, and wherein the traffic monitor further includes a controller that generates a real-time feedback signal of customized data, said data customized to the particular function of one of said management modules.

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